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ARTICLE

Women and Gendered Roles in the History of Diamond Mining in Colonial Ghana

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Abstract

The extant literature on diamond industries in Africa has predominantly focused on men, with few attempts to examine the industry from a gendered lens. I trace women and highlight their gendered roles in the diamond-mining industry in colonial Ghana (Gold Coast). Relying on archival, oral, and visual sources, this article highlights women's involvement in Ghana's diamond industry in different capacities—as discoverers, washers, licensed prospectors, and dealers. Ultimately, I argue that the dominance men have enjoyed in studies about diamond mining in Ghana (and Africa generally) reproduces the colonial archive but can be overcome through creative and innovative research.

Keywords: diamond; Ghana (Gold Coast); mining; gendered roles; official record-/history-making

La littérature existante sur les industries du diamant en Afrique s'est principalement concentrée sur les hommes, avec peu de tentatives d'examiner l'industrie sous l'angle du genre. Je retrace les femmes et souligne leurs rôles sexués dans l'industrie minière du diamant au Ghana colonial (Côte d'Or). S'appuyant sur des sources archivistiques, orales et visuelles, cet article met en lumière l'implication des femmes dans l'industrie diamantaire ghanéenne à différents titres : découvreuses, laveuses, prospecteurs agréés et négociants. En fin de compte, je soutiens que la domination des hommes dans les études sur l'extraction des diamants au Ghana (et en Afrique en général) reproduit les archives coloniales, mais peut être surmontée grâce à une recherche créative et innovante.

A literatura escrita até hoje sobre as indústrias diamantíferas em África centrou-se predominantemente nos homens, com escassas tentativas de analisar a indústria do ponto de vista das questões de género. Neste artigo, sigo o rasto das

mulheres e destaco os seus papéis de género na indústria de exploração de diamantes no Gana colonial (Costa do Ouro). Com base em fontes arquivísticas, orais e visuais, este texto coloca em relevo o envolvimento das mulheres na indústria diamantífera do Gana nas suas diversas funções: como desbravadoras, lavadeiras, prospetoras autorizadas e negociantes. No fundo, defendo que o predomínio de que os homens têm usufruído nos estudos acerca da exploração diamantífera no Gana (e na África em geral) reproduz os arquivos coloniais, mas pode ser superado através de uma investigação criativa e inovadora.

Introduction

On January 1, 1957, renowned African diamond digger Fred Kwofi petitioned Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Gold Coast prime minister, for help "in view of the hardship which the children and grand-children of your petitioner's late mother are undergoing." Evidently, Mr. Kwofi disclosed that his appeal for financial support from the prime minister was for the sake of his dead mother's descendants. Yet the two-page petition was entwined with the discovery of diamonds in the Kyirifan Stream on Dompim stool land in the Tarkwa district, in April 1930, and the subsequent emergence of a mining industry. A year before Mr. Kwofi's mother made her discovery, he recounted that one Mike-Yuchlin—an American contractor for whom he then worked—had explained the geological formation of diamonds to him. "This lecture impressed your petitioner that one day when your petitioner's mother a gold winner by the African method brought home in a hallowed wooden tray a species [*sic*] of hard stones among her winnings," Mr. Kwofi said, "your petitioner was tempted to try that specie by hammering it in an anvil and when after considerable strokes on the anvil the stone was unbreakable, your petitioner concluded that was the diamond referred to in Mr. Yuchlin's lecture." Captivated by this lecture and the prospect that the accidental find may be diamonds, Mr. Kwofi advised his mother, Abina Nokuba, to bring home more samples when she returned to pan for gold the next day. Again, Mr. Kwofi tested the stones by hammering, with the same outcome. Hence, Mr. Kwofi sent the stones to the manager of an unnamed bank, who confirmed that they were diamonds. Later, the chief inspector of mines granted Mr. Kwofi a prospecting license "to search for more" at the behest of Tarkwa's district commissioner, T.R.O. Mangin. Commissioner Mangin also helped Mr. Kwofi export the diamonds through the West African Diamonds Syndicate Limited (WADS) in August 1933. News of Abina Nokuba's find quickly spread, reaching local chiefs. Mr. Kwofi wrote in his petition that when chiefs in Wassa realized that the discovery was financially valuable, "they decided [on] rewarding your petitioner's mother a monthly grant of (£6) six pounds throughout her life time" but the promise was reportedly kept for only three years.[1]

It is hard to tell when precisely a profitable diamond industry developed in Wassa from which the chiefs could pay Abina Nokuba.[2] The reason is that available statistics of diamond exports from colonial Ghana are often provided without explicitly distinguishing what came from either the Wassa or Akyem

fields.[3] Yet, if we assume that the money Mr. Kwofi claimed was promised to Abina Nokuba was paid for three years since the discovery of 1930, then it ended in 1933. Henceforth, Mr. Kwofi does not indicate if he or his mother pursued the money presumably supposedly owed to Abina Nokuba. Their passiveness regarding the arrears and Mr. Kwofi's claim in his petition that diamond mining in the Tarkwa district only started in 1933 makes it doubtful that Abina Nokuba was ever promised money or that any payments were made.[4] It was not until 1957, when Mr. Kwofi petitioned Dr. Nkrumah, that he mentioned the arrears owed Abina Nokuba—who had recently died and left "behind her, children and grandchildren to be trained but [there is] no money."[5]

The Kwofie family's financial predicaments in the second half of the 1950s and the dwindling prospects of Mr. Kwofi's own diamond-digging business caused his plea to Dr. Nkrumah.[6] Mr. Kwofi expected Dr. Nkrumah's empathy, but it is unclear if he received any financial help. Though Mr. Kwofi's petition foregrounded Abina Nokuba in the diamond discovery story and the start of a mining industry in the Tarkwa district, his overall narrative about the enterprise remained male-centered. For instance, Mr. Kwofi's petition acknowledged that it was his mother who originally chanced upon diamonds, but he mostly wrote about how his own endeavors led to the establishment of an industry. By so doing, Mr. Kwofi overshadowed Abina Nokuba. As I will detail below, the male-centered narrative Mr. Kwofi constructed about the history of the African-run diamond industry in Tarkwa was neither new nor will it be the last iteration of stories that begin with Abina Nokuba only for her to subsequently fade, particularly from 1949 and 1957. Yet, when the Kwofie family faced financial difficulties in the late 1950s, Abina Nokuba's unquestioned place as the discoverer of diamonds in Wassa endured, shaping the tone of Mr. Kwofi's petition to Dr. Nkrumah. Combined, historical and contemporary renditions of Abina Nokuba in the historical memory of diamond mining in the Tarkwa district provide a conceptual frame within which African women, as historical actors who contributed to the industry, can be situated and analyzed.

Today, Abina Nokuba is remembered in oral tradition as the woman who first discovered diamonds in the Tarkwa district.[7] By retrieving her story, this article illustrates that reading multivariant sources together can unearth fresh perspectives and project the agency of African women in the diamond enterprise from archives in colonial Ghana, wherein they punctuate dominant male voices. Furthermore, it stresses women's gendered roles by piecing together the patchy evidence of their activities in the diamond industry and contributes to shifting the scholarly framing of diamond history in colonial Africa from dominantly male-centered narratives. Abina Nokuba's story goes against the narrative grain of the diamond industry in colonial Ghana (Adjoboah 2015; Appiah 2011) by unsettling its predominant focus on men. This article does not simply aim to spotlight women in the historiography of diamonds in colonial Africa. Rather, it accounts for the part they played in developing the industry in colonial Ghana by looking at formalized male-centered oral traditions and written public records through a gendered lens. The presence of women (alongside men) in available sources about the African-run section of the diamond industry not only raises

the question of why they remain marginal in historical accounts but also exposes gaps in our knowledge about the gendered division of labor roles in the diamond fields.

For long, the histories of diamonds in colonial Africa have remained stories about men, with few attempts to examine the industry from a gendered lens. With some exceptions (Oti-Akenteng 2017), the main narratives about diamonds in colonial Ghana mirror this perspective. This state of the research literature stems from an uncritical reproduction of the stories told by men (Africans and Europeans alike) in public records created during the colonial era. Rather than seeing colonial-era records exclusively as a problem, this article embraces the challenges they present by sifting through the male-dominated voices in the archives to listen for women. Based on an analysis of newspaper articles, colonial reports, and photographs from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) and the Akyem Abuakwa State Archives (AASA) in Ghana, plus oral interviews, this article traces the story of diamond discovery and interrogates the making of official records/histories about the resulting industry in the Tarkwa district in southwestern colonial Ghana.

Building on this introduction, the next section describes how diamond industries emerged in colonial Ghana and reveals that though women's gendered roles were crucial to developing the African-run aspect of the industry, particularly in the Tarkwa district, or: women remain overlooked by scholars. This is followed by an in-depth examination of historical and current iterations of stories about diamonds in the Tarkwa district, which perpetuates standardized narratives that fail to account for the industry as co-constructed by gendered roles. By jointly assessing the story Mr. Kwofi told about diamonds in his 1957 petition with two similar narratives—first, in a government report published in 1949 and second, in a newspaper article issued in 1953—this section finds that not only was Mr. Kwofi present at these key moments, but that he significantly shaped the standardization of male-centered accounts about diamonds in the Tarkwa district. Taken together, the available sources enable tracking time backward and forwards to thread how stories about diamonds, which maintained men at the center and women on the margin (but sometimes appropriated their gendered contributions to the industry), passed from one decade to another.

Women's Gendered Roles in the Diamond Fields

When Mr. Kwofi penned his petition to Dr. Nkrumah in 1957, he was a reputed figure in Wassa's diamond business circles—which, unlike the Akyem fields, was controlled by Africans. Since around 1933, when diamond mining started in the Wassa area, Mr. Kwofi partnered with other African diggers to prospect diamondiferous lands for local chiefs, signing contracts with expatriate businessmen for financial support to develop the industry and training several African apprentices as they prepared to join the industry as professional diggers.[8] Some Africans who became professional diggers in Wassa, especially ethnic-Nzema men, later migrated to the Akyem district, where Albert E. Kitson of the government Geological Survey Department had discovered diamonds in 1919. The Akyem area was the richest of the two major diamond fields in the colony

(Greenhalgh 1985, 37). The uneven distribution of diamonds on Akyem (or Birrim-Pra) and Wassa (or Bonsa, in the Tarkwa district) lands meant that the subsequent development of industries in each region was different. The rich Akyem diamondiferous lands attracted international firms, which considered the sporadic and scattered finds in Wassa difficult to profitably mine. Hence, the operations that emerged in the two areas differed in scale, in the stakeholders who developed the fields, and in the extent to which African industry grew parallel to European commercial operations.

The Akyem and Wassa fields contained small-sized industrial diamonds, or bort, excavated from shallow pits. A year after Mr. Kitson's find, the Akim Diamond Fields Limited started mining on Akyem lands, followed by the African Selection Trust in 1922, WADS in 1923, Consolidated African Selection Trust (CAST) in 1924, and so forth (Sewordor 2023, 96). While expatriate companies mined the diamond fields in Akyem alongside a handful of African diggers, an exclusively African-run industry grew in the Wassa area. In Akyem, the African chiefs, on whose land diamonds were mined, variously concluded written agreements with mining companies while their counterparts in Wassa contracted African diggers to prospect for them. Until recently, scholars held that before the 1950s, business transactions were negotiated orally in the Wassa area. For instance, historian Peter Greenhalgh has inaccurately claimed that "in the Bonsa Diamondfields there was no written agreement and a form of customary law governed [land] usage" (Greenhalgh 1985, 164 and 169, endnote 2).[9] Fresh evidence shows that already in the 1930s, written agreements existed in Wassa but were limited to transactions between African chiefs, notable diggers like Fred Kwofi, and expatriate private businessmen. Decades later, when the industry expanded to include African migrant laborers from different parts of the colony and continent, the use of written agreements in Wassa consequently increased (Sewordor 2023, 101–3; Sewordor 2024).

In the first three decades after diamonds were discovered in Ghana, the colonial government did little to regulate the various enterprises that constituted the industry. In addition to adopting the existing Concessions Ordinance passed in 1900, colonial administrators enacted a law to tax diamond exports in 1919, and later the Diamond Mining Industry Protection Ordinance (DMIP) in 1926.[10] Until 1950, no legislation was passed. And those which existed had serious flaws that, coupled with their poor enforcement, made them inadequate legal provisions to regulate the industry.

From a modest amount of 102 carats exported from the colony in 1920 (Gold Coast Government 1931, 21), the combined output from African diggings and European companies reached 1,440,322 carats in 1938/9 (Gold Coast Government 1939, 48–49), making Ghana the third largest producer globally. About fourteen years later, in 1952, the colony moved to second place, exporting a little over two million carats (*Daily Graphic* 1953, 10). Behind these statistics are the unsung women (and men) whose toil in the fields unearthed diamonds. They used basic tools including pickaxes and shovels to dig concentrates, which were then processed with shakers or washed by panning method with large wooden cone-shaped bowls. The fine gravel was finally "treated in a hand jig which consists of a very fine meshed sieve which is jerked up and down in a pit of water by a long

arm working on a fulcrum by hand."[11] By the 1940s, women and girls were hired as laborers (alongside men and boys) to work in small groups for licensed prospectors under different contractual arrangements. Laborers in Wassa earned about 4 shillings daily on a non-profit sharing basis, while their colleagues in the Akyem fields received 16 shillings and 4 dimes for each carat they recovered.

Until the 1950s, women originating from Ghana and West Africa more broadly rarely appear in the archives as licensed diamond prospectors or dealers. Yet, exceptional cases of documented women, albeit sporadic and faint, include Comfort Odugabe, Lydia Adeyemi, Rebecca Idowa, Mabel Amoah, Akwasua Obiaah, Affua Oye, Akosua Konadu, and Afua Birrim.[12] On the one hand, these women slowly carved out spaces for themselves to participate in the industry without wholly depending on their male counterparts. On the other hand, they sometimes radically reconfigured previously established gendered norms of production by rising to positions where they employed male laborers to work on their concessions. Though there is much to be uncovered about the lived experiences of the above-mentioned prospectors and dealers to reconstruct a detailed gendered narrative about the diamond industry, we learn from recent scholarship that the enterprise's post-1950s boom-and-burst episodes in the Akyem and Wassa areas restored men as the dominant actors in the industry, even if at different times aspects of the extraction process remained gendered (Oti-Akenteng 2017; Adjoboah 2015).

Since men have historically dominated the diamond-mining business, it is unsurprising that the accounts of women's enterprise remain patchy at best in the existing historiography on colonial Ghana (Sewordor 2023; Oti-Akenteng 2017; Greenhalgh 1985), and other parts of Africa (Sewordor and Daudi 2024; Amupanda 2022; Press 2021; Calvão 2017; Cleveland 2014; Turrell 1987; King 1979). This truth is, however, insufficient to excuse the current state of the literature, which has not systematically accounted for women's participation in the formal or legal diamond industries during the colonial era. Unlike colonial Ghana, historical works that focus on southern Africa have given some attention to women's roles—as mine laborers, as wives who accompanied their husbands to work in the mines, as members of diamond-thieving gangs, as caregivers who maintained the family at home while their kinfolk migrated to the mines to make ends meet, as sex workers in the vicinities of mines, or as mules who facilitated diamond smuggling (Press 2021; Cleveland 2015; Kynoch 2005; Thabane 2000). While this body of work offers useful insights, it has not thoroughly examined women's gendered roles in the making of diamond industries in Africa. The simultaneous development of African-run and expat-owned diamond businesses in colonial West Africa (D'Angelo 2023), enables the telling of a richer story of women in the diamond fields as compared to Namibia or South Africa, where the industry was monopolized by foreign companies and rarely included women.[13]

Gender scholars of colonial African contexts have rightly critiqued contemporaneous archives for their disproportionate coverage of women, compared to men (Musisi 2022; Burton 2003; Geiger 1986). The literature has long established that the patriarchal structure of colonial society enabled men to occupy and maintain positions through which they authored much of the written sources produced in/about that era (Allman, Geiger, and Musisi 2002). This imbalanced

representation of voices offered in the colonial archives defined the narratives historians of colonialism crafted. Yet, it also challenged historians in the postcolony to critically read between the lines of colonial written sources and look beyond them—to nondocumentary alternatives including oral testimonies. The innovative use of inclusive sources, however, coexists with the colonial archives that independent African states inherited, which at best marginally recorded women. Therefore, in using the "essentially neocolonial archives," as historian Jean Allman has put it, "we are grappling with documentary sources no longer penned, categorized, or deposited by a colonial officer or his missionary counterpart" (2013, 107). With this in mind, sociologist Aboabea Akuffo (2023) has examined postcolonial commemoratory dates, the iconography of currency, and names of monuments in the context of Ghana to strongly argue that a state-sanctioned "erasure of women" occurred via "de-historizing," which resulted in national collective memory and history that is not only problematic but also male hegemonic. An unnerving variation of "erasure" is given in Joel Cabrita's *Written Out* (2023)—a damning account of how different powerful forces altogether marginalized women's voices by critically examining the silenced life of Regina Gelana Twala, a Black southern African woman political and intellectual activist. Though Gelana Twala's case is an exceptional feat of erasure from the written archives, it invites us to think carefully about the nature of the (post)colonial archives and the implications for reconstructing gendered and women's histories.

Women's voices are sparse in the colonial archives and sometimes actively erased (Allman 2009). To mend this gap, African historians partly resorted to oral sources to find women's voices that were missing in colonial records. While using oral sources to foreground a critical reading of the colonial written archives, gender scholars of Africa have long demonstrated how different types of sources co-condition each other through feedback loops, as public constructs of historical "facts" take shape (Arnfred 2004). What we know about how oral sources cement into official accounts largely follows what David Henige (2005), Terence Ranger (2012), and others have theorized as the "invention of tradition." Building on these works, this article pushes beyond the fact that women's presence in the colonial archives is marginal and often mediated by men. It highlights moments when oral narratives centered on women seep into the colonial written archives, and later vice versa. Particularly, it reassesses how the making of what may initially seem like distinct sources in the written colonial archives (e.g., Fred Kwofi's petition) overlap and document women's voices through male mediation.[14] By combing through colonial archives, collecting and analyzing oral traditions, historical photos, and newspaper accounts, the rest of this article examines three key moments between 1949 and 1957. These moments, shaped by male-centered narratives about the diamond industry, offer new readings that recover the transformations in the gendered roles African women performed.

Unsettling Formalized Male-Centered Narratives

When I found Mr. Kwofi's petition during an archival search at the PRAAD office in Sekonde, little did I imagine what came next. The petition breathed unexpected life into my research when I decided to follow its trail back to the Tarkwa

district, from where it had been written. At this point, my focus was to visit Tarkwa town, the district capital, and I thus paid little attention to a place called "Ahwetieso," indicated as Mr. Kwofi's residential address on the top right corner of his petition. When I arrived in Tarkwa, I printed a copy of the petition and went about enquiring for stories about diamonds in the town. Repeatedly, the people I spoke to told me that the town was popular for gold mining, not diamonds.[15] To make any inroads, I needed to change strategy. I decided to visit Ahwetieso, and there I struck luck. At the taxi station, I met Jerry Arkah, a driver who lived in Ahwetieso before relocating to Tarkwa. We quickly started a conversation as he drove to Ahwetieso and informed me that the settlement was historically, and still is, known for diamonds. Jerry kindly offered to introduce me to his uncle whom he said was knowledgeable about diamonds. Unfortunately, his uncle was not home when we arrived at Ahwetieso. But Jerry found another acquaintance at Ahwetieso to ask for a possible informant. Following a recommendation, we arrived at the homestead of one Elizabeth Essien. Meeting her was an immense stroke of luck because she was Mr. Kwofi's granddaughter. She granted me the first interview in the series I conducted in a week, which I will discuss below.

Three elements underpin the narrative Mr. Kwofi presented in his petition about the discovery of diamonds in Wassa and the subsequent development of an industry. First, Abina Nokuba's incidental find in 1930. Second, the start of an industry in about 1933. Third, how Abina Nokuba fades from the narrative after she discovered diamonds. These narrative elements have survived to date, differently conveyed in the testimonies of several informants I interviewed at Ahwetieso, Dompim, and Tarkwa. I argue that Mr. Kwofi was central to the construction of this composite narrative. Leading up to his 1957 petition, Mr. Kwofi was present at crucial turning points in formalizing the storyline that begins with Abina Nokuba but forgets her after. Today, just as in the episodes of 1949, 1953, and 1957, Fred Kwofi looms large over his contemporaries, including Abina Nokuba, who helped build a diamond-mining industry in Wassa. For instance, when I showed Figure 1 to members of the Kwofie family during my fieldwork in 2021, they quickly identified Mr. Kwofi, who was central to their oral testimonies about the diamond industry. Rarely did anyone talk about Abina Nokuba without me asking.[16] When they did, it was increasingly clear that they were not deliberately erasing Abina Nokuba from the history of diamond mining in Wassa. However, their failure to mention her unless specifically probed had a similar effect to that of decades of excluding women from the history of diamond mining, reinforcing gendered representation in the narrative.

We may begin in 1949 when the colonial government asked A.G. Loveridge, G.W. Stacpoole, and W.S. Bond to form a committee to investigate African enterprise in the colony's diamond-mining industry and recommend ways to improve it.[17] After concluding their work, the members of the committee compiled an eighteen-page report alongside an appendix of maps and photographs.[18] Mr. Kwofi appears in two photographs in the Loveridge committee's report. In Figure 1, Mr. Kwofi is seen squatting in the foreground, holding an unclear object with a hat placed before him on the ground. Figure 2 shows Mr. Kwofi standing under an umbrella with a large group and directly behind a woman bending between two others, all of whom were demonstrating how

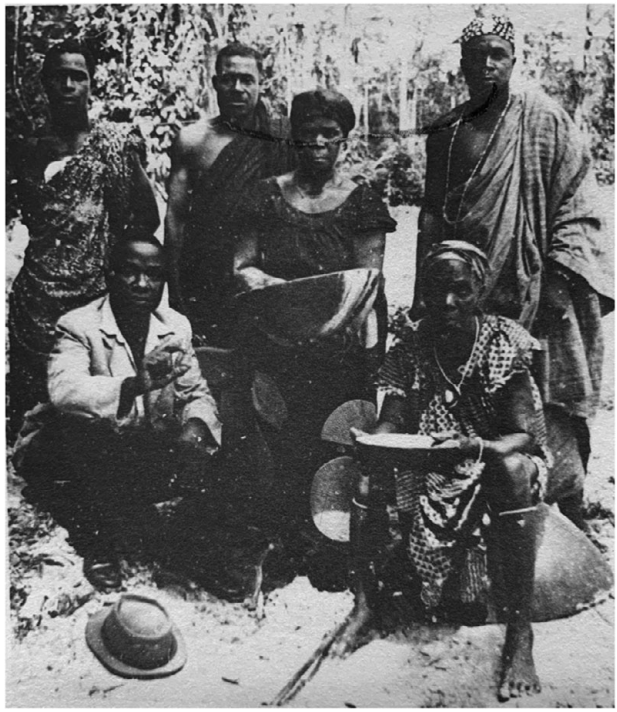


Figure 1. "Group with (in extreme right foreground) Madam Abina Nokuba who claims to have first discovered diamonds in the [Kyirifan] Stream on Dompim Stool land in April 1930 whilst washing for gold. The Ohene of Dompim [Pepisa] Nana Nyonwa Penyin stands behind her." Source: PRAAD, Kumase, 1949.

Figure 2. "Panning and picking out diamonds." Source: PRAAD, Kumase, 1949.

diamonds were panned and picked from a dug-out pit containing water and concentrate. The committee's documentation about Wassa's diamond industry was a crucial moment when stories of the discovery locally circulating in the area passed into the official colonial record. The caption accompanying Figure 1 aptly records this feedback loop but curiously minimizes the public knowledge that Abina Nokuba first found diamonds as "claims." Consequently, what we know about women in the diamond industry is limited, for individual cases and more so collectively. The resulting methodological challenges, as variously articulated by Cabrita (2023), Allman, Geiger, and Musisi (2002), and Achebe and Robertson (2019) in African contexts, reiterate the question of why and/or how we know so little about women women, underscoring the importance of amplifying the voices of women in understanding how oral traditions about the industry have been passed down from one generation to another.

During their investigations, Loveridge, Stackpole, and Bond traveled through the Wassa and Akyem diamond fields, met and photographed leading stakeholders of the African enterprise, and conducted interviews. As Figures 1, 2, and 4 demonstrate, most of the key actors in the African enterprise were men, of whom Fred Kwofi and Ben Kwofi together with Abina Nokuba later earned the accolade "the historic three" for spearheading the establishment of the diamond industry in the Tarkwa district (*Daily Graphic* 1953, 10). The dominance of men over women in controlling the African diamond industry in Wassa did not mean that they always agreed on how to conduct the enterprise, or that the women were entirely sidelined. For example, the business interests of Fred Kwofi and his cousin, Ben Kwofi, sometimes conflicted. In 1940, as Greenhalgh notes, Ben Kwofi wrote to the district commissioner of Tarkwa encouraging him to refuse Fred Kwofi's application for permission to use a machine to prospect for diamonds. Ben Kwofi's action was prompted by the "grave financial difficulties" Fred Kwofi had allegedly caused the Dompim stool in a previous diamond business deal (Greenhalgh 1985, 160, endnote 10).[19] Though little is known about the work of African women diggers or prospectors in Wassa at this time, the unnamed women who appear in Figures 1, 2, and 3 are preliminary visual testaments of the efforts women and girls put into developing the diamond industry.

In my interviews with some descendants of Abina Nokuba at Ahwetieso, they confirmed that their great-grandmother taught them how to pan for diamonds. Vida Agyakum, the queen-mother of Ahwetieso, remembers not only that she learned to pan for diamonds from her great-grandmother, but she also demonstrated in my presence the specialized technique of washing and picking diamonds. The agile performative swoop with her right hand of imagined concentrate from a conical wooden bowl she held with her left hand mimicked what the women in Figure 2 also exhibited to the Loveridge committee in 1949.

When the Loveridge committee simply reported that the "final washing is performed by women" it minimized the important work women did in the Wassa and Akyem diamond fields and gave a partial view of the gendered relation of production. As Figure 3 shows, and the committee members knew, the "employment of women and girls in the industry occurs" for duties beyond washing. The report added that "In the Bonsa fields it is large domestic employments of the women of a village whose menfolk are engaged in the diggings although there is a proportion of

Figure 3. "Carrying gravel to the washing plant." Source: PRAAD, Kumase, 1949.

Figure 4. "The historic three who laid the foundation of the African diamonds industry…." Left to right: Fred Kwofi, Abina Nokuba, Ben Kwofi, and an unidentified man. Source: *Daily Graphic*, 1953.

employed female labour. Throughout the industry we estimate that 10 percent of the labour is female." The report characterized this female labor base as neither "undesirable" nor giving "rise to any scandalous conditions."[20] Though fragmentary

available sources show that women and girls dug diamonds alongside their male counterparts in colonial Ghana, existing histories of the industry remain heavily focused on men. This narrative lens ignores the unfulfilled potential to write colonial Ghana's diamond history while accounting for the fact that the industry was built on a gendered division of labor.

From a combination of photographic and written materials, we only learn that in 1949 African women in the Wassa diamondiferous fields did the "panning and picking" of diamonds (Figure 2). Yet, they did more. For instance, in the Akyem area, young girls were employed by African prospectors to transport headloads of concentrates from dugout pits to designated washing plants, as seen in Figure 3. Nonetheless, rarely do colonial archives capture the names of these women or girls whose labor was integral to the development of the diamond-mining industry in Ghana. This truth warrants my call to read the history of the diamond-mining industry as built on gendered labor roles to shed fresh light on women's involvement in the enterprise not only as final washers, but also up to the 1950s as independent discoverers, prospectors, and licensed diggers in the African-run part of the industry, or diamond sorters employed in state-owned companies since about the 1960s. Altogether, what we know about these women expands our understanding of how the different positions women increasingly occupied reconfigure scholarly assessments of the diamond enterprise beyond the restrictions of a male-centered lens. Contrary to what male-authored colonial written records like the Loveridge committee's report would have us believe, women's productive labor exceeded washing concentrates to finally reveal diamonds.

In April 1953, the next major episode that *manwashed* Abina Nokuba's biography in the history of diamond mining unfolded. Twenty-three years after Abina Nokuba chanced upon diamonds in the Kyirifan Stream, Moses Danquah visited Ahwetieso and wrote a story about the local diamond industry for the state-owned newspaper, the *Daily Graphic.* "Much attention was given to the diamond industry during the recent Budget Session of the Legislative Assembly" the author stated to open his article. He continued:

> To those who have been following the fortunes of the industry and realise the important role it plays in the economic life of the Gold Coast, this sudden interest in the industry will not come as a surprise. African production has reached an unprecedented peak and last year, according to the latest figures I have just received from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, it accounted for 1,500,262 carats, the European mining being responsible for 680,295 carats. This large African output constitutes almost 70 per cent of the total Gold Coast production which makes the Gold Coast the second largest producer of diamonds in the world. (*Daily Graphic* 1953, 10)

The key role Tarkwa's diamond industry played in the colonial economy bolstered the constituency's political position in Ghana, and in turn the colony's place in the global trade of industrial diamonds. The second part of the newspaper article chronicled the historical evolution of Ghana's diamond-mining

industry and placed a spotlight on African output. The reporter said that Abina Nokuba told him in an interview that "she did not know it was diamond" she had picked up when she went panning for gold in the Kyirifan Stream decades ago.[21] Probably for the first time, if not a rare instance, Abina Nokuba found a voice in a contemporaneous source to speak for herself. Yet, like previous and future iterations of the story of diamond discovery in Wassa, the shine Moses Danquah put on Abina Nokuba was brief and punctuated with skepticism.

Two photos were printed alongside Moses Danquah's article for the *Daily Graphic.* One is reproduced here as Figure 4. The second shows a seventy-eight-year-old Abina Nokuba holding a walking stick, like her pose in Figure 4. "Though Madam Abena Nokubaa had made the historic 'discovery'," the writer said,

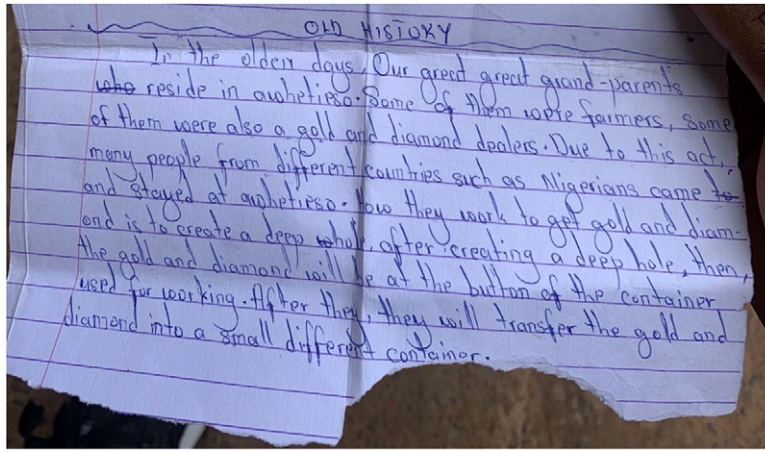
> ... it was entirely due to her nephew, Nana Ben Kwofi, Chief of Simpa, 18 miles south-west of Tarkwa, and her son Fred Kwofi of Dompim and Ahwetieso that the identity of those ... scintillating stones which had attracted the attention of the old woman as she was picking gold from the concentrate she had brought home from the Kyirifan river was established. It was also to them, especially Fred Kwofi, that negotiations were completed with the Government to enable Africans to participate in the industry and with, first, the West African Diamond Syndicate ... and, later, with the British Bank of West Africa at Tarkwa to market the diamonds. (*Daily Graphic* 1953, 10)

Moses Danquah's framing of the diamond discovery story and evolution of an enterprise in Wassa teased his readers into expecting more about Abina Nokuba's role, only to divert attention to Fred Kwofi and Ben Kwofi. Indeed, Mr. Danquah's half-hearted acknowledgment of Abina Nokuba as the woman whose diamond finds birthed an industry in the Tarkwa district is evident in his constant use of parentheses to describe her discovery. Moses Danquah knew that A.E. Kitson found diamonds in 1919. So, we must consider the possibility that his tone may have signaled his attempt to qualify Abina Nokuba's discovery as, strictly speaking, not the first in the colony. Yet, the *Daily Graphic* article was another moment that reinforced a male-dominated narration of diamond history in colonial Ghana—strongly influenced by Mr. Kwofi's (or a masculine) voice while exalting him and lowering Abina Nokuba (or women) to footnotes in the larger story. Abina Nokuba died a few years after the *Daily Graphic* article was published, making it her last and potentially only chance to have directly shaped the story of diamond discovery in Wassa as a gendered narrative. As we have seen, Abina Nokuba's agency, captured in surviving records, remained ephemeral during her lifetime.

If Moses Danquah's article about Wassa's diamond industry, like other renditions, conceals more than it reveals about Abina Nokuba's role, interrogating Figure 4 opens further lines of inquiry. What does Abina Nokuba's clothing reveal about her socio-economic standing considering her historic role as the woman who first discovered diamonds in the Tarkwa district? What does her outfit say about her son's claim that she did not receive the money Wassa chiefs promised

to pay her from diamond proceeds? How can Fred Kwofi's claim be read alongside oral testimonies from surviving members of the Kwofie family suggesting that Abina Nokuba received some payments? What contemporary politics of historical claim-making are engendered in the murky facts about Abina Nokuba? These questions return us further critically speculate on the petition introduced at the beginning of this article. Abina Nokuba's clothing in Figure 4 is not affluent. It is modest, compared to the neat buttoned-up shirt and trousers of Fred Kwofi or the elegant cloth of Ben Kwofi. Perhaps Abina Nokuba's outfit was a telltale sign of her economic situation, deprived for twenty years of the money Wassa chiefs promised her for discovery of diamonds. If so, she stood in contrast to the financial benefit that the colonial state and male members of her extended family were reaping from her find. While all three men captured in the photo frame smiled as they looked into the camera, Abina Nokuba maintained a somber posture, as though waiting for her story to be told. Alone, Fred Kwofi's claim in his petition—that Wassa chiefs gave his mother a cash reward for finding diamonds in the district for only three years, 1930–33, despite a lifelong promise—is hard to prove. Yet, when I showed up in Ahewtieso with a copy of Fred Kwofi's petition and delivered it to members of his family, some young kinsmen fixated on this claim and asked me about the validity of the archival document as a basis to recoup the said cash. This intent to retrieve money supposedly owed to their progenitor mirrors Fred Kwofi's attempt in 1957 to get financial support based on Abina's labor. Furthermore, Fred Kwofi's claim contradicted the testimonies of other relatives, who said that their great-grandmother told them she received the said money—though for an unspecified duration.[22] Despite Abina Nokuba's role as the woman who discovered diamonds in Wassa, my attempt to reconstruct her life in connection to the industry attracted some male kin who sought to reap the fruits of her labor, while doing little to retain her memory.

The potential for writing historical narratives that take gendered roles in the diamond industry seriously in colonial Ghana remains unrealized in the research literature because scholars have yet to systematically compile the irregular traces of women in the industry in the archives. If the colonial archives present unenticing invitations to thoroughly read the history of diamonds through a gendered lens, oral traditions add to it. To flesh out this point, I draw on the interviews I conducted at Ahwetieso, Dompim, and Tarkwa. During several interviews, I experienced the "invention of tradition," manifesting as the oral recounting of versions of the diamond discovery story that center on Fred Kwofi, even if they mention Abina Nokuba.[23] When I interviewed Francis Kweku Bukru—a nonagenarian, ex-diamond digger, and Fred Kwofi's contemporary—his recollection of diamond discovery in Wassa was strikingly similar to the narrative Mr. Kwofi presented in his petition to Dr. Nkrumah.[24] The marginal place Abina Nokuba occupies in popular memory about diamonds in Wassa begs the question of what foundation men like Fred Kwofi and Ben Kwofi would have built on without her find. This critique highlights the need to render Ghana's diamond history, particularly in the Tarkwa district, with sensitivity to its gendered dimension. Following David Henige (2005), I argue that oral tradition about diamonds in Wassa contributed to fixing formalized narratives, in written and photographic forms, on three occasions—firstly, in 1949 via the Loveridge


OLD HISTORY

In the olden days, Our greed great grand-parents who reside in awhetieso. Some of them were farmers, Some of them were also a gold and diamond dealers. Due to this act, many people from different countries such as Nigerians came to and stayed at awhetieso. How they works to get gold and diamond is to create a deep whole, after creating a deep hole, then, the gold and diamond will be at the button of the container used for working. After they, they will transfer the gold and diamond into a small different container.

Figure 5. "Old History" of Ahwetieso. Source: Author's photo, courtesy Elizabeth Essien, 2021.

committee's report; secondly, in 1953 through a *Daily Graphic* publication; and thirdly, in 1957 through Fred Kwofi's petition.

Ongoing transgenerational transfers of oral tradition about the diamond story in Ahwetieso, Dompim, and Tarkwa involve multiple translations (i.e., straddling oral tradition and written text) that relive the historical trend of diminishing gendered work relations that were central to the creation of the industry. For instance, on the day I first interviewed Elizabeth Essien, one of Mr. Kwofi's granddaughters, she retrieved a piece of paper containing a short history of Ahwetieso that partly mentions diamonds (Figure 5). The "old history" was written by Elizabeth Essien's uncle, whose name she did not disclose. Whether this telling of the family's history by a man was a coincidence is hard to say, but it is still telling. Stories about diamonds remain in the contemporary historical imagination of the local inhabitants of Ahwetieso, some circulating at the risk of neutralizing a gendered past—what Cabrita (2023) and Akuffo (2023) respectively call "erasure" and "de-historizing" of African women.

Conclusion

The historical sources I have assessed in this article evince how gendered roles were obscured in the construction of formalized histories of Wassa's diamond industry. From the 1930s to 1950s, formalized oral traditions about the pioneers of the diamond industry in the Tarkwa district seeped into official written documentation, consequently grounding the industry's history in a masculinized narrative frame. The male-dominated narratives fixed through official record-/history-making are, in turn, shaping present-day opinions of how an African diamond-mining enterprise took shape in Wassa while neglecting how the industry grew from gendered divisions of labor. By interrogating the local historical oral memory of Abina Nokuba's role in the making of a diamond-

mining enterprise in Wassa, this article attempts to unsettle male-centered stories and historiography about diamonds in colonial Ghana and Africa broadly.

Acknowledgments. The nudge to write this article came from several colleagues who rightly noticed that women were largely unaccounted for in my ongoing book project about crime and counterintelligence in the diamond enterprise in colonial Ghana (Gold Coast). Rather than simply writing women into the male-dominated narrative, I chose to approach their historical roles in shaping the diamond industry from a gendered perspective. This article is the outcome, positively transformed by generous feedback I got on earlier drafts from E. Kwaku Mintah Danquah and Christabel Agyeiwaa and constructive comments from the reviewers and editorial team of the *African Studies Review*. I am immensely grateful to Jerry Arkah, Michael Kwofie, and Michael Larbi for their support and the Kwofie family for sharing their history with me during my fieldwork. I dedicate this article to the memory of Abina Nokuba.

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Notes

1. WRG 15/1/0696, Fred Kwofi, Ahwetieso, to Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Accra, January 1, 1957. Public Records and Archives Administration Department (hereafter, PRAAD), Sekonde.
2. According to a history of the British Bank of West Africa, one of two banks licensed to buy and export African-won diamonds, the "Bank's branch in Tarkwa was making advances against diamonds as early as around 1935." See Fry (1976, 149).
3. The earliest available statistics of African-won diamonds are 1935/36 = 34,502 carats; 1936/37 = 31,396 carats; 1937/38 = 16,464 carats; 1938/39 = 32,811 carats; 1939/40 = 36,116 carats; 1940/41 = 38,966 carats; 1941/42 = 51,448 carats; 1942/43 = 46,987 carats; 1943/44 = 84,113 carats; 1944/45 = 33,800 carats; 1945/46 = 68,250 carats; 1946/47 = 35,956 carats; 1947/48 = 87,808 carats; and 1948/49 = 197,726 carats. ARG 1/5/1/27, "Report of a Committee to Review the Existing Position in Regard to the Winning of Diamonds by African Enterprise and Make Recommendations for the Proper Advancement of this Local Industry" (June 1949), p. 4, PRAAD, Kumase.
4. Some descendants of Abina Nokuba suggested to me during my fieldwork that their progenitor told them that she received the said payments. Yet, the circumstances of the payments and how long she received them are unclear (Elizabeth Essien, granddaughter of Fred Kwofi, interview, Ahwetieso, May 4, 2021).
5. WRG 15/1/0696, Fred Kwofi, Ahwetieso, to Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Accra, January 1, 1957. PRAAD, Sekonde.
6. I have spelt the family name as "Kwofie" to conform with how they write it now. Fred Kwofi signed his surname as "Kwofi," without an "e" at the end. Hence, the difference in the spelling of the same name in this article.
7. Interviews held in Ahwetieso, May 4, 2021 with: Vida Agyakum (aka Nana Afan II/great-granddaughter of Fred Kwofi and queen mother of Ahwetieso); John Owusu (aka Nana Kojo Owusu/*Tufuhene* of Ahwetieso); Bright Ofori (aka Nana Kofi Warh/grandson of Fred Kwofi and *Abusuapanyin* or head of the Kwofie family); Michael Kwofie (aka Elder Sonful/great grandson of Fred Kwofi); and Elizabeth Essien (granddaughter of Fred Kwofi).
8. "Diggers" has been used in this article to refer to Africans who extracted diamonds using rudimentary methods on a small scale and were either Ghanaian or emigrated from nearby colonies.
9. Greenhalgh's erroneous impression has been rectified in the introduction to Sewordor (2024).
10. Both the original DMIP and the first amendment were enacted in 1926. They were respectively the 11th and 29th ordinances passed that year.

11. AASA/10-11/1/497, "Report of the Labour Enquiry Committee" (1953), pp. 36–38. Akyem Abuakwa State Archives (hereafter, Kyebi).
12. See ADM 36/1/134. PRAAD, Accra and AASA/6/28 and AASA/6/39, Kyebi.
13. For a case where women joined gangs of diamond thieves, see Thabane (2000).
14. For instance, during the research for this article I found a fascinating collection of pictures at the photo library of the Information Services Department (a unit of Ghana's recently-dissolved Ministry of Information) in Accra. Though the photos, taken by men, depict women involved in different stages of diamond extraction and marketing, the women were generically identified without specifying the individuals in the pictures. These images are perhaps the single most detailed photographic documentation of women's work in Ghana's diamond enterprise waiting to be critically analyzed and published by academics.
15. While this is generally true, it must be noted that such opinion which positions gold over diamonds shrouds the historical importance that diamond mining held in the area, obscured by the fact that today, more people in Tarkwa district are involved in mining gold than diamonds. Daniel Sam Onumah (ex-miner at Goldfields Limited, interview, Tarkwa, May 1, 2021).
16. Vida Agyakum (aka Nana Afan II/great-granddaughter of Fred Kwofi and queen-mother of Ahwetieso, interview, Ahwetieso, May 4, 2021).
17. For an analysis of the committee's work and ensuing debates, see Sewordor (2023).
18. ARG 1/5/1/27, "Report of a Committee," PRAAD, Kumase.
19. For contextual information about Ben Kwofi's decision, see Sewordor (2024).
20. ARG 1/5/1/27, "Report of a Committee," pp. 2–3 and 14.
21. Moses Danquah states that Abina Nokuba made her find in 1929. This is inconsistent with Fred Kwofi's recollection that the discovery was made in 1930.
22. Elizabeth Essien (granddaughter of Fred Kwofi, interview, Ahwetieso, May 4, 2021).
23. Interviews held in Ahwetieso, May 4, 2021 with: John Owusu (aka Nana Kojo Owusu/*Tufuhene* of Ahwetieso); Bright Ofori (aka Nana Kofi Warh/grandson of Fred Kwofi and *Abusuapanyin* or head of the Kwofie family); Michael Kwofie (aka Elder Sonful/great grandson of Fred Kwofi); Frederick Agyakum (great grandson of Fred Kwofi); and Elizabeth Essien (granddaughter of Fred Kwofi). Interview in Dompim, May 6, 2021 with John Ohene-Nyartwi (ex-diamond miner and late contemporary of Fred Kwofi).
24. Francis Kweku Bukru (ex-diamond miner and early contemporary of Fred Kwofi, interview, Ahwetieso, May 3, 2021). In a separate interview, Vida Agyakum (aka Nana Afan II/great granddaughter of Fred Kwofi and queen-mother of Ahwetieso) presented a strikingly similar version of the discovery story.

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