

Rethinking artisanal mining: Nuances of hegemony, dispossession and resistance amongst rural artisanal mining communities

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INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, colonialism and apartheid have left a legacy of a gendered, racially and geographically skewed extractive industry, in which many rural communities endowed with mineral resources face severe economic hardships, marginalisation, and socio-cultural disorganisation resulting from, among other things, land and mineral resource dispossession. The overarching objective of this study is to understand the contextual nature of artisanal mining practices and the lived experiences of artisanal miners in rural South Africa, and to further analyse the drivers of the widespread continuities of artisanal mining practices despite the constraining past and current policies. The paper's central premise is that the current political, economic, and social landscape of artisanal mining practices in South Africa should not be viewed in isolation from the cultural history that shapes the practice and the social and spatial dynamics in which artisanal mining is rooted. A great deal of scholarship has laid a strong foundation in terms of investigating the heterogeneity of artisanal mining by examining it from different strands, ranging from the socio-cultural configurations of artisanal mining¹ to situating artisanal mining within the pre-colonial and post-colonial history of dispossession and mineral resource struggles². Building from this, this paper highlights four key themes pertaining to artisanal mining:

- Artisanal miners' lived experiences, work trajectories, and evolving lifestyles
- Social and spatial dynamics shaping artisanal mining
- Dispossession and resistance, and
- Land and mineral resource struggles.

¹ Chipangura, N., 2019. The archaeology of contemporary artisanal gold mining at Mutanda Site, Eastern Zimbabwe. *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage*, 6(3), pp.189-203.

Grätz, T., 2002. Gold mining communities in Northern Benin as semi-autonomous social fields.

² d'Avignon, R., 2018. Primitive techniques: From 'customary' to 'artisanal' mining in French West Africa. *The Journal of African History*, 59(2), pp.179-197.

Geenen, S., 2016. Artisanal frontier mining of gold in Africa: Labour transformation in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. *African Affairs*, 115(459), pp.296-317.

BACKGROUND

The mineral-rich, impoverished communal areas of South Africa, which fall under the former 'homeland' areas, have rapidly become a focal point for transnational industrial mineral extraction³. However, many of these communities have experienced first-hand the challenges of living near these industrial mining operations. They have been stripped of their sovereignty, their traditional wealth, and, to a certain extent, forcibly evicted from their indigenous land⁴. Artisanal mining exists either in the vicinity of these transnational mining operations or in old and disused mine sites scattered across the country. Unlike large-scale industrial mining, artisanal mining is said to be small-scale, informal and usually a community-driven type of mining⁵. There has been a growing momentum worldwide to situate artisanal mining within the development agenda as a positive livelihood strategy due to its potential to contribute to poverty alleviation and ensuring communities benefit equally from the mineral wealth within their localities⁶. However, this sector has been beset by challenges ranging from distorted access to mineral rights and land, poor regulation, and socio-environmental problems which will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

METHODS

This is a qualitative case study conducted in Blaauwbosch, located in Newcastle, adjacent to the infamous colonial coalopolis of Dundee, situated in the KwaZulu-Natal province. Although mining has declined in this region, it remains a significant part of the economy. The study is based on field research conducted from June to September 2021 in Blaauwbosch with 30 artisanal miners. Data was collected using in-depth interviews, site observations, and oral histories. This location is particularly unique because artisanal mining constitutes a tradition for this community; it is undertaken communally, and women are heavily involved. Despite its rapidly growing footprint on rural economies in sub-Saharan Africa, communal artisanal mining has received scant attention in development and policy discourse. This paper seeks to close this gap by documenting the lived experiences of artisanal miners.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

The Blaauwbosch mine is believed to be over 50 years old. It is occupied by the local community, including women and men of different ages, with a common goal of making an honest and decent living. The community of Blaauwbosch believes that they have rightful ownership of the land on which the mine is situated. As a result, there is a perception that the mine belongs to the community. The mine site is endowed with clay and coal, which are used to produce bricks and occasionally sold to the community for domestic consumption. Although the artisanal miners come from diverse economic and socio-cultural backgrounds, and different age groups, they are unified by the quest to escape poverty and unemployment. This illuminates the sense of shared identity, belonging and communalism, which is contrary to the popular belief that artisanal mining communities are inherently chaotic, violent and greedy.

“We have become family, I have brothers and elders who I admire and respect, and there are some whom I refer to as my fathers because of the fatherly role they play in my life.”⁷

³ Mnwana, S., 2015. Mining and community struggles on the platinum belt: A case of Sefikile village in the North West Province, South Africa. *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 2(3), pp.500-508.

⁴ Manamela, D. M. S. (2019). *The impact of mining on indigenous African communities in Limpopo (South Africa)* (Doctoral dissertation, North-West University (South Africa)).

⁵ Ledwaba, P.F., 2017. The status of artisanal and small-scale mining sector in South Africa: tracking progress. *Journal of the Southern African Institute of Mining and Metallurgy*, 117(1), pp.33-40.

⁶ Ledwaba, P. and Mutemeri, N., 2017. Preliminary study on artisanal and small-scale mining in South Africa. *Johannesburg: Open Society Foundation for South Africa*.

⁷ Research participant who is one of the miners

CONTESTING “ILLEGALITY”

The case of Blaauwbosch is unique due to the community’s relationship with the land and the mine. For example, it emerged that the miners consider themselves legitimate and rightful owners of the land from which mining operations are conducted. Currently, the mine is dispersed between three homesteads, with some miners paying rent. The miners predominantly rely on permission from the landowners to mine a site. This is an informal process that does not require any government-issued licence to mine the site, which is a contradiction in terms of South Africa’s mining legislation. Participants justify their engagement in artisanal mining due to the government’s failure to improve their economic conditions. Some of the miners sought to reclaim the legitimacy of their operations by highlighting the critical role it plays in reducing criminal activities in the community. According to the miners, the mine keeps the youth occupied and provides them with an honest means of income generation as opposed to crime.

Emanating from the findings, the paper identifies the following challenges prohibiting artisanal miners from meeting their legal obligations: distorted access to minerals and land, ambiguity surrounding formal vs customary claims over land and mineral resources, and lack of knowledge and awareness about mining permits and policies. The study recommends that policy and the development agenda fully consider these issues in their different contexts. This will enable interventions to speak to the grassroots needs of the communities on the ground. As has been noted, the way artisanal mining is treated by policy and the development discourse has not appreciated the diversity and heterogeneity of the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector, and as a result, interventions have yielded uneven success. Without repeating what had been emphasised by many scholars, this paper supports the need for policy and legislative reform that will cater to the needs of the sector. Beyond that, the drivers of artisanal mining identified in this study - unemployment, poverty, landlessness, and inequality - are indicative of South Africa’s broader developmental challenges. This highlights the necessity to align the current regulatory and legislative framework for ASM with the country’s development priorities.



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Nonkululeko Zondo is currently pursuing her PhD in Development Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Her research, which is informed by critical development research methodologies, seeks to document the lived realities of small-scale and artisanal mining communities. Her research further interrogates issues around mineral resource governance for both mining communities and mining-affected communities and the gendered and racialised dynamics of land and mineral resource struggles in South Africa. Nonkululeko has contributed to several strategic documents at a provincial and national level, such as the KwaZulu-Natal Digital Transformation Strategy (2020-2025). She has also worked with the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA) and contributed to the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), focusing on land reform and other important governance issues in the country.

