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WHERE DO WE KEEP THE GODS? GALAMSEY, SACRED ECOLOGY AND THE CRISIS OF SUSTAINABILITY IN GHANA

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Abstract

In Ghana, where rivers are revered as abodes of deities, illegal gold mining (galamsey) is not just an environmental crisis – it is a spiritual catastrophe. This study interrogates the paradox of galamsey's economic appeal versus its desecration of sacred ecosystems, asking: Where do we keep the gods when their habitats are destroyed? The insatiable desire of man in the search for precious minerals such as gold in the ecosystem has become the craze in the Ghanaian ecology in recent times. The phenomenon Galamsey which literally means gather and sell in recent times has been in competition with the conservation and sustainability of natural reserves especially water bodies in the ecosystem. Considering the sacred nature of these water bodies which are believed to be the haven of the gods and ancestral worship, the livelihood and preserve of these natural resources are a cause for concern. The paper utilised the Afrocentric theory and qualitative paradigm as its methodological stance and used interviews, archival documents as its data collection instruments. The analytical tool used was document analysis. It was revealed that polluted rivers are considered 'abandoned by the gods', eroding communal trust in traditional ecological knowledge. Thus, the conservation and sustainability of the environment could be achieved if man sees nature as human as himself. It concludes that for friendly co-existence man must protect and preserve the ecology from its gradual disappearance from the activities of galamsey.

Keywords: Galamsey, sustainability, recreation, environment, gods

1.0 Introduction

In Ghana, where rivers pulse with both life and divinity, the toxic wake of illegal gold mining (*galamsey*) has birthed a paradox: communities destroying the very ecosystems they consider sacred. This study confronts the spiritual crisis lurking within Ghana's environmental emergency, asking not just how *galamsey* pollutes rivers, but what becomes of the gods who inhabit them. Where do deities reside when their watery abodes turn to poison?

Humankind and nature are unique bodies in the environment. Their relationship is comparable to Siamese twins. Each depend on the other for its livelihood and support. It is a principle that defines and shapes their ramifications of the ecosystem – where man is the head. Thus, the effect of the activities of man in the ecosystem largely or directly affect the livelihood of the other organisms. In the view of Amponsah and Mensah (2024) there is a mutual relationship between man and his ecological habitat. It is therefore, the man's dependence which is hinged on how friendly and habitable the environment is to the organism that reside in it.

The environment and its interconnectedness with man is very unique. It is the environment which comprises of water bodies, aquatic animals, plants, animals and man mutually depend on each other for their living. However, humankind the chief beneficiary of the ecosystem from where he draws solace, growth and even reverence has not been too affable to it. For instance, it is from the ecosystem that the provision of food, water, cash crops and other mineral extractions that empower humankind to survive as well as its spiritual wellbeing (Amponsah & Mensah, 2024) is taken care of.

Considering the unique role that the ecosystem plays in the development and growth of humankind, it appears that the chief beneficiary has not really helped in the conservation and preservation aspect of their existence. Throughout human existence humankind's dependence and the search for minerals has been its pre-occupation but it appears the incessant, insatiable and wanton depletion of the ecology of Ghana is dire. This search for precious minerals which has been termed as *galamsey* in local parlance – i.e 'gather and sell' has in many ways contributing to life threatening ailments on aquatic, animals, other animals that depend on the water for their existence, plants and humankind. To this end, the small-scale illegal mining has exploded across Ghana's landscape driven by global gold prices and local economic desperation. The question then arises: In what ways do practices involving *galamsey* affect sustainable culture and economic livelihood?

Therefore, a look at the intersection of environmental sustainability and the Ghanaian ecological landscape is a pressing issue in contemporary discourse. Ghana with its diverse ecosystems ranging from coastal savannahs to tropical rainforests is facing increasing environmental challenges. These comprises of climate change, biodiversity, deforestation, biodiversity loss and unsustainable resource extraction (*galamsey*). To address these issues, it is important to rethink approaches to nature conservation, preservation and sustainability, drawing on indigenous knowledge systems and innovative policy framework. Using Afrocentric and phenomenological lenses, we investigate this spiritual-ecological nexus, documenting both the cosmological consequences of *galamsey* and the potential for indigenous knowledge to guide restoration. To this end the paper questions where do we keep the gods?

2.0 Related Literature

2.1 African concept of the environment

The African concept of the environment is deeply rooted in the continent's diverse cultural, spiritual and ecological systems. The environmental philosophy emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and nature declining anthropocentrism and accepting the environment's inherent value and agency (Woldeyes & Belachew, 2021). In recognizing this, traditional African religions have over a long period of time, see the environment as a sacred entity that must be revered. By this the environment is protected through religious customs, beliefs and practices that is strictly adhered to. The sacred nature of the environment as perceived by the African is both spiritual and physical. This sacred nature of the environment is phenomenal and seen as wielding power and presence beyond human comprehension.

In effect the benefits derived from the spiritual and physical worlds ensures the conservation and preservation of the ecology (Amanze, 2024).

Traditional African approaches to environmental conservation are deeply rooted in the establishment of religious beliefs, customs and practices, viewing nature or the ecology as an extension of the supernatural where man is responsible for its preservation for future generation. It is however, interesting to note that Danquah (1968) avers that the living must endeavour to manage and conserve the environment for future generations while they have to account for their stewardship to the ancestors. This assertion by implication challenges the African to ensure the ecology is well managed and handed down to the next generation bearing in mind their accounts to the ancestors. Woldeyes and Belachew, (2021), Boateng, (1998) add credence to the above assertion that the ecology or the environment is a living being and man is the steward and must ensure the land is well managed, preserved for future generations with accountability to the ancestors. This is consequential of the communalism worldview of the African. However, African indigenous ways of knowing and becoming one with nature have been supplanted through epistemic violence, the imposition of western views of the environment over Africa worldviews through systems and institution that exclude or exploit local knowledge has led to the loss of indigenous environmental knowledge in some regions especially in Ghana. In view of this, the ecological wisdom of the African has been shoved to the background and causing injurious harm to the entire ecosystem all in the name of the search for riches which appears to be found under the water basins in the Ghanaian society.

2.2 *Galamsey* in Perspective

Galamsey is a local term derived from the “gather them and sell” refers to illegal small-scale gold mining in Ghana. It has been a persistent issue for decades contributing to both economic benefits and severe environmental degradation. It is typically carried out by individuals or small groups who mine without legal permits or adherence to environmental regulations.

In Ghana, gold mining has been done since the tenth century, when local populations used traditional techniques. These early miners extracted gold from rivers and shallow pits using crude methods. Large-scale gold mining began in the 15th century with the advent of European colonists, which resulted in the construction of multiple mines at that time. Local artisanal mining continued despite the global mining firms’ supremacy, establishing the groundwork for what would eventually be known as *galamsey*.

2.3 Cultural Implications of ‘*Galamsey*’

The cultural norms and historical context surrounding *Galamsey* in Ghana present a significant challenge to the regulation of the sector, as highlighted by Hilson and Garforth (2012) and Afriyie et al. (2016). Mining, particularly artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM), has deep historical roots in many communities, often seen not only as a livelihood but as a traditional practice that is deeply woven into local culture and identity. This cultural framing complicates state intervention efforts, as mining is often perceived as a fundamental aspect of community life, passed down through generations. For many miners, *Galamsey* is not just an economic activity but a means of preserving ancestral rights and practices. Thus, state-driven regulatory measures, such as licensing or land reclamation initiatives, are frequently viewed as threats to these deeply ingrained traditions, which fosters resistance to external intervention. This cultural context, therefore, creates a layer of complexity in policy enforcement, as local communities often resist formalization or regulation, viewing these efforts as encroachments on their way of life.

Moreover, the communal nature of *Galamsey* operations further entrenches its persistence and complicates regulatory efforts. As highlighted by Hilson (2017) and Afriyie et al. (2016), *Galamsey* activities often operate through robust social networks that are critical to the success of the mining operations. These networks provide miners with access to essential resources such as labor, capital, and market linkages, which enable them to continue their work outside the formal economy. The strength of these networks effectively creates a parallel economy, which operates beyond the reach of state authorities. This parallel economy is not only resistant to external regulation but also facilitates the

informal nature of the sector, making it difficult for authorities to monitor or control mining activities. Additionally, these social networks often foster a sense of solidarity among miners, who view state-imposed regulations as a disruption of their social fabric and collective identity. The existence of these alternative economic and social structures highlights the complexity of regulating the sector and underscores the need for a more culturally sensitive approach to policy development, one that recognizes the value of these communal ties while simultaneously encouraging sustainable and formalized mining practices.

Addressing these challenges requires a policy shift that acknowledges and integrates cultural and social realities into regulatory frameworks. Simply imposing top-down enforcement measures, without considering the historical and communal significance of *Galamsey*, risk further alienating local communities and exacerbating the resistance to formalization. Therefore, effective interventions must involve a balance between cultural sensitivity and sustainable development goals. This could include promoting community-driven approaches, where miners are involved in decision-making processes, capacity building, and the creation of incentives for miners to transition to formalized and sustainable practices. By aligning regulatory efforts with local cultural values and practices, policymakers can help ensure greater community buy-in, reduce resistance to reforms, and ultimately foster a more sustainable mining sector that benefits both the local population and the broader national economy.

The involvement of foreign nationals, particularly Chinese operators, in *Galamsey* has introduced a layer of cultural tension that worsens existing conflicts within Ghana's mining sector. Mantey et al. (2016) note that the introduction of advanced machinery by foreign operators, who often bring in more efficient and mechanized methods, disrupts traditional mining practices that have been deeply rooted in local cultures for generations. These advanced technologies, while potentially increasing production and profits, have sparked conflicts between local and foreign miners, as the mechanization of artisanal mining challenges the communal, labor-intensive techniques that have been historically practiced by Ghanaian miners. For many local miners, traditional mining methods represent not only a livelihood but also a cultural heritage passed down through generations, tied to their identity and community values. The sudden shift towards mechanized practices, which are seen as an imposition by foreign operators, creates feelings of alienation and resentment among local miners, who view this as a threat to their way of life and to the social dynamics of their mining communities.

From a cultural perspective, this tension extends beyond mere economic competition. The introduction of foreign machinery and operators has led to a perceived cultural invasion, where foreign miners, particularly from China, are seen as undermining local customs, work ethics, and social structures. In many cases, foreign nationals dominate mining areas, sidelining local miners who are often relegated to lower-paying, menial jobs. This results in a significant power imbalance that not only creates economic disparities but also fosters feelings of cultural disempowerment. Local miners, who are accustomed to operating within a community-based framework, often find themselves excluded from the decision-making processes that impact their livelihoods. The tensions between local miners and foreign operators thus reflect broader issues of cultural identity, autonomy, and the desire to maintain control over local resources and practices. This situation underscores the need for culturally sensitive policy interventions that address both economic and social factors. Policies that facilitate the integration of advanced technologies should prioritize collaboration between local miners and foreign operators, ensuring that cultural heritage is respected and that the benefits of mechanization are shared equitably within mining communities. Promoting dialogue and establishing regulatory frameworks that include both local and foreign stakeholders could help ease tensions, foster mutual understanding, and create a more sustainable and culturally inclusive mining sector in Ghana.

2.4 Traditional knowledge and sustainable practices

Ghana's rich cultural heritage offers valuable insights into sustainable living. Indigenous ecological knowledge, passed down through generations, provides models for resource conservation and ecosystem management. Traditional knowledge is an important asset for sustainable development, offering valuable insights and practices in conserving and preserving the ecosystem. Karn (2024) asserts

that traditional knowledge serves as an invaluable asset in sustaining the ecology through techniques such as rotational farming, water conservation rituals which encompasses bans on fishing during certain days and periods, contribute to the making of the community resilience and environmental stewardship resolute. The above assertion affirms the impact that these indigenous knowledge practices can inform climate change adaptation strategies. Karn (2024) and Smith, (2018) indicate that the indigenous people possess rich ecological wisdom which has been handed down to them over generations rooted in deep connections with their environments. It is the rich ecological wisdom accumulated over centuries make them resilience in the face of environmental challenges by employing these strategies such as agroforestry, intercropping, water conservation and sacred groves and forests conservation. These sustainable practices do not only curtail environmental degradation but largely contribute to strengthening the interconnectedness that humans have with the ecology for safe co-existence. On the part of Adams (2018) he intimates that the incorporation of indigenous ecological wisdom into championing climate change challenges foster more effective and culturally sensitive to environmental overseers. The enormity of destruction caused by illegal mining in Ghana has positioned that nation in a precarious state in that a little tap will plunge the nation into a social, political and economic mess. Currently, it appears the incessant mining activities on going on Ghana's water bodies especially in the Ashanti, Central and Western regions is quite dire. For instance, heavy metals introduced into the water bodies has made farmlands unproductive thus affecting farmers. Again, access to potable drinking for both humans and livestock has had serious health implications on them. Therefore, a collaboration with indigenous communities will facilitate mutual learning and engagements will aid in co-creation of innovative solutions for a sustainable future.

4.0 Methodology

The study situates within the ideologies of Molefe's Afrocentricity. Afrocentric theorist such as Molefi Kete Asante and Ama Mazama have strong methods and principles which aim at situating African ideas, methods and phenomena. These serve to interpret and conceptualise the nuances embedded in most cultural appropriate African realities. Pellerin (2012) shares thoughts on Afrocentricity and describes it as a performance. As a performance it functions as a governing tool of vibrant avenues which generate discourse in retelling social phenomena and can eventually help in the redevelopment of researches. Afrocentricity is situated within philosophical and theoretical make up in the discipline of African Studies which conceptualises law generalisations, theories and methods (Pellerin, 2012). Using qualitative research approach, this study analyses the problem translated into a research question under the theme of sustainability and economic livelihood. This study aligns with the tenets of Molefe's Afrocentric Theory that phenomena and methods are a part of the African. Thus, the depletion of the environment for economic gains forms a part of human lived experiences. This further makes this study a phenomenological study. Data collected are primary documents in the form of images of water bodies that existed in good condition until they were affected by the methods of illegal mining thus, *galamsey*.

Purposively, 15 participants were chosen to offer a range of interrelated but distinct viewpoints. Among them were five (5) miners, five (5) local residents, and five (5) traditional priests. Perceptions of rivers as sacred places, the spiritual ramifications of environmental degradation, and the socio-cultural effects of *galamsey* were all examined through semi-structured interviews with each participant. With consent, interviews were audio recorded and lasted 45 to 60 minutes. Oral histories and local myths were among the archival materials examined in order to place the findings in the perspective of conventional cosmologies.

Data was thematically examined using document and content analysis. Key themes, including greed, belief in ancestral guidance, spiritual relocation, the destruction of sacred river bodies, and the conflict between ecological belief systems and economic survival, organised and coded the transcripts. This study showed how the gods are seen to have abandoned contaminated rivers, which reflects a wider breakdown of conventional ecological wisdom. Triangulation between site observations, archival sources, and interviews increased the findings of cultural depth and believability.

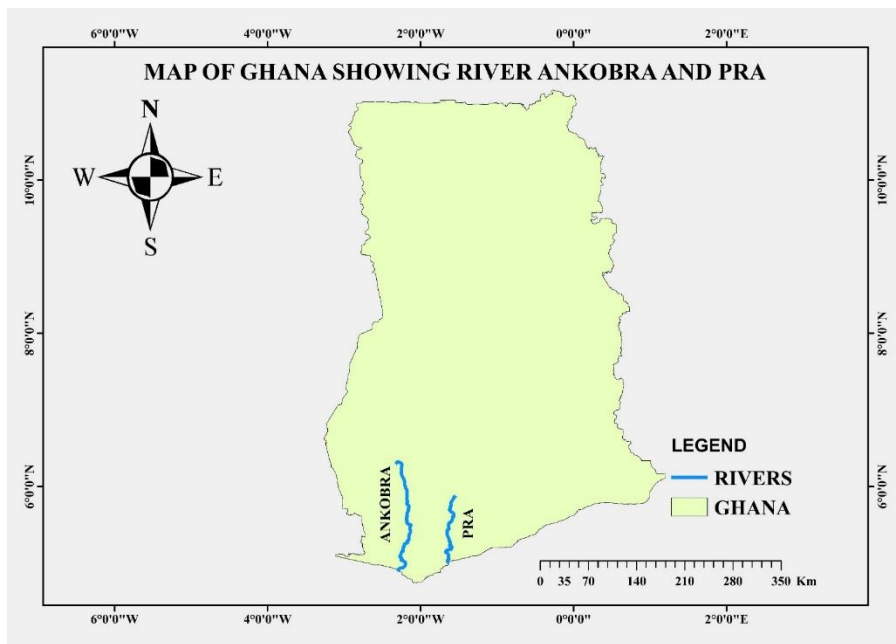


Fig: 1: Map of Ghana depicting rivers Ankobra and Pra

The figure above depicts the map of Ghana with the two major rivers Ankobra and Pra well labelled in blue. These rivers are situated in the southwest region of Ghana. These rivers hold historical significance due to their ecological importance with regards to water supply, recreation and agriculture as well as their association with gold mining activities, particularly the illicit small-scale mining popularly known as *galamsey* (Duah et al., 2020; Bannerman et al., 2003);

Historically, both the Ankobra and Pra rivers are among the longest rivers in Ghana and rich with mineral resources particularly gold (Hilson, 2002)). Since pre-colonial and colonial eras, when Ghana was known as the Gold Coast, these rivers – Ankobra and Pra have played a crucial role in the country’s trade. The reason being that the indigenous communities along its basins have their source of livelihood depended on the river and the precious minerals mined from them. They extracted gold using safe traditional methods along the basins of these rivers until the advent of colonization that changed the whole dynamics to mining. The foreign corporations set up extensive operations near the river basins for their mining activities.

In the last few decades however, *galamsey* activities have become increasingly popular along the rivers. The rivers and surrounding areas are rich in gold resources, hence illegal miners have often targeted these bodies of water to extract gold using crude equipment such as lead and mercury as refiners. Consequently, this has had a severe environmental degradation such as pollution of the rivers, destruction of aquatic life and threats to human health (Aryee, Ntibery, & Atorkui, 2003; Hilson, 2002).

The map is very significant as it helps to contextualize current national discussions about environmental protection, sustainable mining and water resource management by highlighting the Ankobra and Pra rivers’ geographic locations in Nzema East municipality of the Western region and Twifo Atti Morkwa district of the central region of Ghana respectively. The population of the municipality according to 2021 population and housing census stands at 94,621 with 48,590 being males and 46,031 females. Similarly, the population of Twifo Atti Morkwa district recording 49,998 males and 50,853 females totaling 100,851 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

The inhabitants in these areas are predominantly farmers and fisher folks. These two areas as depicted on the map as well as the livelihoods that depend on them. These rivers are at the centre of governments

and civil society to campaign to stop illicit mining and restore ecological balance in Ghana’s mining zones.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

5.1 Sustainability and Economic Livelihood.

The study developed a model to aid in the analysis of data gathered on the field with gleanings from the theory and literature. The model indicates a cyclical model of human practices as result of economic and social survival among individuals who involved in *galamsey* practice.

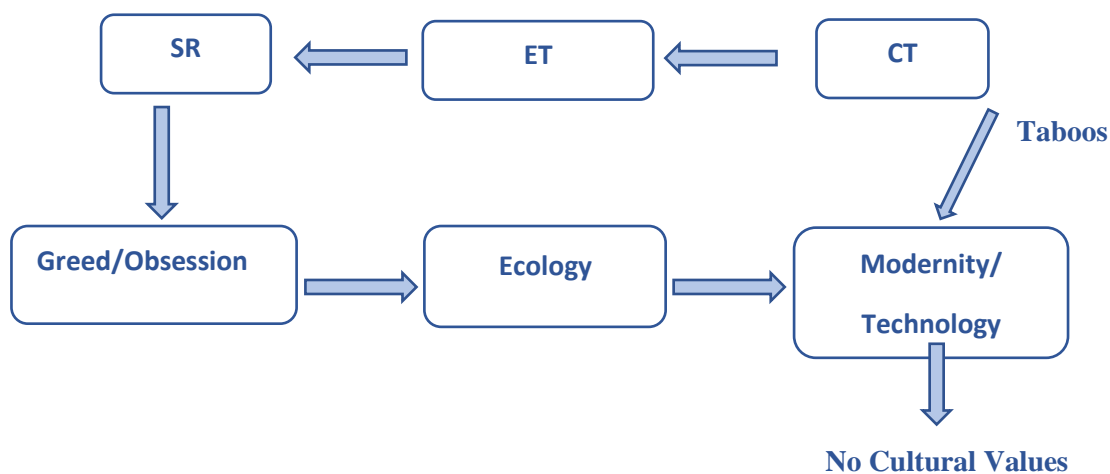


Figure 2: Model of Economic Livelihood

Source: Authors’ Construct

With reference to the question of the study, the practice of *galamsey* is borne out of individual economic gains and survival. It is worth noting that the same survival leads to the appalling nature of the environment. The model in Figure 1 above indicates an area marked ‘taboos.’ In terms of Afrocentric methods and practices, the African found ways to preserve and sustain the environment. These methods were embedded in rules which appeared like forbidden acts in the society. For instance, it is considered a taboo in Ghana to farm on Tuesdays. It is also worth noting that these taboos were universal but varied from society to society. This is to say that, areas which had no farm lands but had water bodies also had their own similar taboos. As intimated by Karn (2024) and Smith, (2018) that the indigenous people have rich knowledge in ecological practices which has been handed down to them over generations embedded in deep affiliations with their environments. However, these practices have gradually erased the value on the preservation of these ecological heritage. A total neglect to the philosophy of traditional and cultural belief (CT) which should have led to the preservation and sustenance of the environment (ET) has rather given way to negative social response (SR). As a result of this, individual greed and obsession has led to the neglect of the ecology which should have been the heritage of generations unborn. It is worth mentioning that, knowledge of technology and modern practices has found a way of eating away the belief of the African in some of these taboos. The belief that gods and deities exist in trees and water bodies only appear as myths.

African philosophy of the environment may have similarities with Western philosophy of the environment. To the Westerner, the material, physical and spiritual aspect of the environment are distinct whereas with the African, these three are fused together Ekwealo (2011). It is believed that once a river body is desecrated, every deity living within it leaves it. The belief in some parts of Ghana is

that, no sacred being exists in an unhealthy environment hence our question, *where do we keep our gods?* Below are some images of natural resources that are depleted as a result of galamsey practices. Images in Figures 2, 3 and 4 depicts scenes of water bodies that used to be wholesome for human consumption but are now depleted because of human practices. In essence, both Ankobra and Pra turbidity not only kills the fish but per local beliefs, drives away Nana Bosompo the river's protective deity.



Figure 3: Ankobrah River (Before and After)
Source: myjoyonline, 2024



Figure 4: River Pra (Before and After)
Source: Boadu Duah (2024)



Figure 5: An aerial view of a galamsey site.
Source: ghanaweb, 2024

Dessein et al. (2015) discuss three pillars of sustainability when they categorized it as Culture *for* Sustainability, Culture *in* Sustainability and Culture *as* Sustainability. They are argued that culture exists as a driving force of sustainability. For culture *in* sustainability, the practice of sustainable is autonomous. It continues with culture *as* sustainability which forms as necessary foundation and framework for achieving the objectives of sustainable development in a given situation and for this study, the sustainability of the environment. Last but not least is culture *for* sustainability. Here, culture which is also seen for our purpose as African practices and methods serve as a concept and a mediating force for sustainable development.

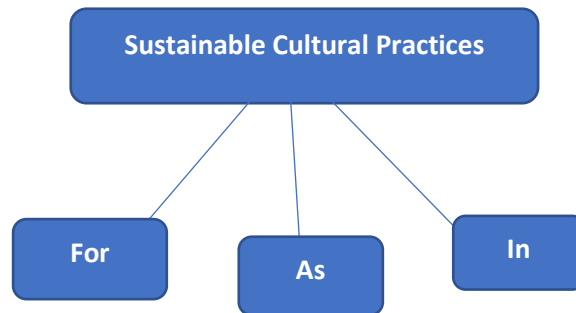


Figure 6: Afro- Galamsey Model of Sustainability

Source: Authors' Construct

The model in Figure 6 above, expounds on the methods of the preservation of the ecology wherein lies the belief of the African. Historical narratives which were used as concepts to sustain the environment rests within culture for sustainability. In the light of negative practices and the pursuit of human livelihoods, the environment has been set aside anything preserve worthy, the case of *galamsey*. Crucially, our Afro-Galamsey Model (Fig. 6) reveals how mining's economic cycle disrupts the sacred cycle: when elders no longer enforce Tuesday farming taboos, youth see rivers as gold sources rather than divine homes. Yet resistance persists—in Beposo, women revived monthly libations to heal their river, demonstrating Indigenous knowledge's adaptive potential.

6.0 Conclusion

The culture of preserving and sustaining African practices which has always existed in the use of language and in taboos have been abused. The toxic legacy of *galamsey* in Ghana cannot be measured in mercury levels alone. This study has revealed a deeper tragedy – the systematic unraveling of sacred relationships between communities and their divine landscapes. Where rivers once pulsed with spiritual vitality, many now run silent, their guardian deities displaced by dredgers and greed. Considering the discussions above, it is clear that the Afrocentric method of keeping and sustaining the environment has been neglected. Our findings present not just an environmental emergency, but a cultural emergency demanding solution that heal both visible and invisible wounds.

There is apathy in the way individuals as a result of economic livelihood have left the environment and the life of the 'ancestors' at the mercy of economic gains and bad environmental practices.

While commenting on the depleting nature of natural resources, it appears that the African methods of sustainability as an influential force to achieving the aim of sustainable development can no longer be considered autonomous. Perhaps the gods have not abandoned Ghana's rivers after all, but are waiting at their polluted edges for humans to remember how to see and serve them again. The work of reconciliation begins by asking not just where we keep the gods, but whether we still know how to listen when they speak through the land. If Africans desire in the sustainable practices of nature which does not only provide economic livelihood but also form part of heritage, the African, thus the Ghanaian must consider *where we keep the gods*.

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