

Original Research Article

Social Representation of the Environment and Perception of the Mining Industry in Cote d'Ivoire: The Case of the People of Agbaou in the Sub-Prefecture of Didoko

Kone Fatoumata^{1*}¹Doctoral Student, Department of Sociology, Felix Houphouët-Boigny University (Abidjan-Cote d'Ivoire)**Article History**

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, there has been significant development of the mining sector in West Africa (Soro, 2011). Côte d'Ivoire, which has significant mining potential, intends to use this sector as a vector for economic and social development, to make up for the shortcomings of the agricultural sector, which for decades was considered to be a pillar of development. However, the Ivorian mining industry also faces recurrent protests from local populations (Gnamien, 2014). Given the strategic importance of this sector, it is necessary to gain a better understanding of the social representations of these populations in the face of the social and environmental challenges posed by mining projects. This study therefore sets out to understand the ideologies associated with the mining industry by local communities. It focuses on the specific case of Agbaou Gold Operations (AGO), which operates the Agbahou gold mine in the Divo department and has repeatedly experienced social tensions surrounding its activities. Using a methodology based on literature review, observation, interviews and, as an analytical tool, thematic content analysis, this study enabled us to understand the dynamics of the social and political context in which the mine operates. This study enabled us to understand the socio-environmental dynamics induced by AGO's activities as perceived by local populations.

Keywords: Mining industry, social representations, environment, perception conflicts.

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1-INTRODUCTION

Following independence, the Ivorian government took initiatives to make mining one of the pillars of the country's development (Soro, 2011). Indeed, the creation of the Société pour le Développement des Mines (SODEMI) in 1962 and the adoption of the mining code in 1964 as well as the texts for its application are clear evidence of this government commitment (Soro, idem). The aim of this commitment was to establish standards capable of regulating the actions of the various players in this field of activity, in order to make it a link in the Ivorian economy.

Then, in the 1980s, the mining code that had previously regulated mining activities was revised, with the aim of encouraging exploration and extractive industries companies to invest in this sector (Gnamien, 2014). Decree no. 84-1061 of 13 September 1984 authorises gold and diamond mining.

In addition, a new mining code was adopted in May 1995. This code provides fundamental guarantees to attract private investors. It allows explorers to become operators and encourages the free circulation of profits (Oulai 2002). This situation has encouraged the search for and discovery of several mineral deposits. At the same time, this has contributed to the expansion of Côte d'Ivoire's mining cadastre (Soro, *ibid.*). From north to south, passing through the east and west, in December 2017 there were 179 exploration licences in force (including 142 for gold) awarded to 76 companies. (GPMCI, 2017). Mining investment, for example, rose from FCFA 67 billion in 2011 to FCFA 157 billion in 2015 (DGMG, 2016), an increase of 105%, with a dynamic in terms of employment (9,000 direct jobs according to the) and a 15% share in 2017 in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) GPMCI (2017).

However, the economic mining policies that were beginning to develop until 1995 did not

*Corresponding Author: Kone Fatoumata

Doctoral Student, Department of Sociology, Felix Houphouët-Boigny University (Abidjan-Cote d'Ivoire)

incorporate the issue of environmental and social impact into the requirements of the activities. This epistemic vacuum was a determining factor in social disputes in several parts of the country between local people and mining companies (Gnamien, 2014). To remedy this situation, Law No. 96-766 of 3 October 1996 on the Environmental Code was drawn up to introduce the principle of an Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) and an Environmental and Social Management Plan (ESMP) for any project likely to have an impact on the environment. It will be revised in line with the 2014 Mining Code, which requires a community development plan to be drawn up with local communities and authorities, and a fund to finance local socio-economic projects to be set up, to which 0.5% of the turnover of mining companies is allocated. This fund is managed by a Local Mining Development Committee (CDLM). It also sets out the mechanisms for compensating landowners and people affected by the project.

It was against this backdrop that mining company Endeavour launched its Agbahou gold mine project in the Divo department in 2014.

A number of measures have been taken at various levels to comply with the regulations.

However, conflicts have arisen between the mining company and the people affected and/or the population in general. These conflicts are either open or latent.

In light of the above findings, it is clear that despite the actions taken by the mining company, conflicts of all kinds are occurring between the main players in the project ecosystem (the mining company and the communities in the impact zone).

The aim of this study is to understand the factors that explain these conflicts between the AGO mining company and the people of Agbaou.

We hypothesise that the existence of conflictual relations between the mining company and the people of Agbaou is linked to the representations that the latter have of their environment and their perception of the impact of the mining industry on this environment.

2-METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out in the village of Agbaou in the sub-prefecture of Didoko. This choice was justified by its proximity (3 km) to the installations of the industrial mining company Agbaou Gold Operation (AGO). These people are also in recurring conflict with the company.

It was carried out from March to April 2019 through direct observation and interviews using an

observation grid and an interview guide as tools. A documentary survey was also used to analyse previous writings on the subject.

Content analysis was used to understand how the people of Agbaou see their environment and how they perceive the impact of the mining industry on it. The aim was to identify the various recurring and relevant themes that were analysed in the interviews.

In this study, the number of subjects was chosen carefully to ensure that saturation was reached. We therefore interviewed.

Family chiefs, who are responsible for their families under customary law. They are consulted on land issues relating to the mine because they manage it for their various families:

- Heads of household. They are the owners of the land sought by the mine. This land is generally used as a production base to cover the daily expenses of the household.
- The village chief and his notables, who are the moral and legal guarantors of the villages and also the people's interlocutors with the mining company.
- Youth leaders. Young people are very active and at the forefront of demonstrations against the mine;
- Women's leaders. Women are also concerned because they make up a large proportion of the population. They are rarely consulted about compensation for household land. It is therefore interesting to understand how they see the mining company.

With these different actors, we had to understand:

- The social and political organisation of the village,
- Uses and practices relating to the environment before the installation of the AGO,
- The impacted populations' perception of their environment prior to the installation of the mine,
- Impacted communities' perception of the interaction between AGO and the environment,
- Environmental changes observed by the communities,
- Perception of environmental changes observed with the installation of AGO.

3-RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section looks at the social representations of the environment within communities prior to the installation of AGO. The aim is to analyse the social constructs, environmental uses and practices prior to AGO's arrival.

3-1-Uses and Practices Relating to the Environment Prior to the Arrival of AGO

3-1-1 The Environment as an Economic Support

In Dida society (Agbaou ethnic group), economic activity is based on agriculture. The department of Divo has long been considered to be the "granary" of Côte d'Ivoire due to its high agricultural potential and the size of its harvests, which were exported to several parts of the country, Nassa (2013). This reputation is due in particular to its geographical location and the fertility of its soils. In 2016, for example, it was estimated that there were more than 70,000 farms in the region, compared with 10,026,564 nationally, according to the 2015/2016 Census of Farmers and Agricultural Holdings (REEA). These figures were confirmed by the village chief, who said: "Here, we work the fields. When we say Dida, we mean fields. Otherwise you're going to eat. That's how we live. Anyone who doesn't work the fields".

This shows that farming is a major activity in the life of the Dida. It ensures the family's subsistence.

3-1-2 Crops Grown on the Plot Prior to AGO's Installation

As indicated in the previous chapters, the département is a major agricultural production area. Overall, the crops grown on the plots before AGO's arrival were industrial crops and food crops. "If you grow cocoa or coffee, you're going to eat his money every year. And then you leave it to your children. But we do a bit of chilli, okra and manioc to eat as well. Before, we didn't pay for all that". The perennial crops mentioned represent a sustainable investment in the eyes of the local people. They grow food crops for their own consumption and to reduce household expenses. Here, the environment is a support for social activities that perform the main economic function. At the same time, it helps to guarantee the means of subsistence for families.

3-2 The Magico-Religious Functions of the Environment for the Populations Affected

In addition to this economic function, the environment through its components plays several roles in this society. The Dida people regard man as an entity linked to nature by invisible ties (Gadou, 1995). This belief led them to make rational use of natural resources insofar as this contributes to maintaining the balance of life in general. Several local management systems described as 'local knowledge' mediate this people's relationship with nature.

The sacredness of nature among the Dida is based on a magico-religious dimension and includes interests in nature conservation (Gadou, idem).

"There's our river, the genie in it is called GBADJO. It's a woman, she's black like that! If you see her breasts, it's 'tchôkô'. But there they are again. The river Gbadjo, they haven't compensated yet. We're on it. There were fish there, but I didn't pay for fish before.

Today, here's the mine, here's their factory and Gbadjô is in the middle. They haven't destroyed it yet, it's there. You should have seen the fish we used to catch there. One day, Mr K. (a mine agent) came to see me there, he said aaah Mr Kouadio, I understand why you don't want to leave here, djaaa you eat well! This river belongs to our Wonda family. That's where they (talking about AGO) get the water and then they wash their gold. They take the water from it and then they wash their gold".

3-2-1 Sacred Sites as a Mechanism for Preserving the Environment

Specific places, such as forests, mountains or rivers, may be the focus of religious practices. In this way, all components of nature are viewed from a divine perspective, and people are linked to nature by spiritual ties. Any use of natural resources involves rituals designed to seek permission from the deities and apologise for their negative actions in the forest universe, which belongs to the Creator-God (Memel-Fote, 1969). All the activities of social life have their gods: the god of agriculture, fishing and hunting. "The genie is gone, but in a little while he'll be back. The river genie is here. It's a woman! she's here. For a while I was the one who went and then I spoke up and then it was just fish she gave me. Or I put my note there, I go fish is full inside um, I go to eat. Or she sleeps there, that's it".

The sacralisation of certain sites by the communities seems to confer on them a certain "power" and "supernatural" powers. The use of these sites for mining is seen as a factor in the disappearance of the mystical beings that protect them. However, they acknowledge that they have not continued certain practices and have therefore lost these "powers". It is the loss of these powers that makes them vulnerable to the mining industry.

3-2-2 Totemic Practices

In their relationship with nature, the Dida have adopted strategies to protect it through forbidden practices. These are sets of rules emanating from the ancestors or based on myths that the Dida are obliged to respect on pain of punishment. In this context, natural resources, by virtue of their sacred nature, constitute totems. "The totem is a dietary ban on an animal or plant" (Levi-Strauss 1962, p. 20-35).

Totems relate above all to the resources of biodiversity, namely animals and plants, which are subject to a taboo. This prohibition relates to the consumption of a food or may also be a prohibition on engaging in certain activities on a given day (Gadou, 1995). Totems are protective animals, because their beneficial role is based on a historical, mythical or legendary fact in African traditions. But in many cases, totems are directly linked to the prescriptions of the

ancestors. These are certain animals whose consumption is forbidden for mythical reasons, as a member of the Daako notoriety explained to us: "We don't eat certain meats here. These are our totems. Panther, for example, we don't eat that. And then there's a type of deer; black deer. Some totems are explained by mythical events involving animals.

Violators of these prohibitions are liable to punishment by the chiefs of the lineages or by the forces of nature, depending on whether the violation concerns a rule of the lineage or of the social group to which the offender belongs in the village. The totem pole implies a non-aggression pact between humans and the chosen animal, and hence with nature. "It's because our parents told us so. So we don't eat them. It's a bit like parents too. Because they helped our ancestors. Often in wars and so on", said a local man in Agbaou.

In short, our survey revealed two major uses of the environment in the communities affected by AGO. Firstly, in economic terms, the environment is the main source of economic production for these communities. The main activities are agriculture and traditional gold mining (orpaillage). The main crops grown were coffee and cocoa, followed by annual crops such as bananas and manioc. Secondly, in terms of magic and religion, these communities have a strong attachment to nature and its components, to which they attribute supernatural powers. According to them, these elements, which are sacred, guarantee the balance and material and immaterial prosperity of the populations.

In such a context, the installation of the mine on their land is perceived in different ways by the local communities.

3-3 Perception of the Populations Affected by the Mine of their Environment Prior to its Construction

In terms of their use of the environment, the aim was to understand how they saw it.

"Before, when there was no mine, there was no hunger and it rained. But they cut down all the trees. It's the woods that make it and then there was the rain. There are times when it doesn't rain for up to 6 months".

We can see that the local people have an idyllic perception of their environment before the mine was installed. They believe that the abundance of trees at that time favoured good rainfall, thus guaranteeing good agricultural yields. According to them, the presence of the mine means that there is less rain, which in turn has an impact on their agricultural production. "Today, since they came, it doesn't rain very well. They say climate change. But we know that it's our forests they've spoilt that are doing this. The geniuses who make it and then it rains have left. So we can go 6 months without rain. Before, it wasn't like that. Often

when the weather's a bit bad and then it doesn't rain, you go and adore the geniuses. And then it rains. But it's not like that any more".

So, in addition to the physical components of the environment that favoured good rainfall, there were also the magico-religious components that guaranteed the availability of rain.

3-4 Installation of the Mine as a Factor in the Disruption of Socio-Economic Activities

At community level, the installation of the mine generally gives rise to a great deal of hope. Local people expect their living conditions to improve. These projects are therefore well received from the outset, as can be seen in the extract below.

We have been informed of the mine's arrival. At Agbahou, the mine started a long time ago. We did the sampling here. We went as far as Taabo. We dug down to a depth of 40 m.

Now the question you asked about the mine, I have to say that when we expected the mine, we were very happy because our parents told us that where there is a mine there is joy.

When they said that the mine could be exploited, the white people were happy and we were all happy. We thought that in Agbahou, everyone would be working, everyone would be laughing. Because when you suffer until, in the end, you have to laugh. But you suffer until the end, you still suffer until. Interview with a chef de terre.

This extract shows that local people were enthusiastic about AGO setting up on their land, because of the benefits the company could generate. It is clear that the local people were looking forward to the mine's arrival to bring them joy, as the following statement illustrates: "When we waited for the mine, we were very happy because our parents told us that where there is a mine, there is joy". To make this joy a reality, they say they have made "sacrifices". These involve physical effort during exploratory research, as well as magico-religious practices to guarantee good results for the miners.

In the village of Agbahou, where the mining exploration teams have set up camp, a number of promises were made to the local people to reassure them and obtain their agreement. Firstly, according to the villagers, they were promised that they would benefit in the main from the socio-economic advantages of the mine, given the scale of the negative impacts they would suffer, and the "sacrifices" they would have made.

Secondly, the "negotiations" would have taken place directly between the miners and the community, without the presence of a third party. This would have given them the opportunity to set out their conditions

directly. In fact, it was this assurance that led to acceptance of the mine at Agbahou.

At the beginning there was someone who was in contact with the villagers. He was the one who came and talked to our parents, our elders.

They did everything at Agbahou level here, between us here, with the parents. They didn't call the sub-prefect or the prefect or the administration. None of that happened. They said Agbaou first! When the mine starts, Agbaou will be 90%. And that's why the parents blessed the land and made sacrifices. They gave themselves up, others died in it. Because this is Africa, you have to go into the forest and make the libations. So Agbaou has lost a lot of relatives, all our relatives are gone, we're on our own now. Interview with an official.

This extract shows that the social conditions surrounding the installation of AGO were peaceful within the local communities. The local people saw it as an opportunity to improve their living conditions. They believe that they played a part in the advent of the mine thanks to the mystical practices they performed. This is why the arrival of other stakeholders to publicise their relationship with the mine, in particular the administrative authorities, is difficult to accept. During the research, they were consulted directly by the miners.

3-5 Impacted Communities' Perception of the Interaction between AGO and the Environment

3-5-1 Installation of the Mine as a Factor in the Desecration of the Land

As we have just seen, the Dida have a spiritual relationship with nature and its various components. The installation of the mine, which is taking up large areas of land, some of which contain sacred sites, is seen as a factor in the desecration of these places of worship. Even if these sites are generally the subject of compensation negotiated with the customary guarantors, their social functions are not guaranteed. "But they destroyed everything that was inside. The genius, what we were doing and the whites were afraid of us. When we say black is a sorcerer, it's because black is in contact with genies. And genius is power. And we've lost a lot of that power".

This extract shows that the presence of the mine, according to the local people, alienates them from their "genies" and thus contradicts the links they had with them. In fact, in order to be able to guarantee the favours requested by men, these 'genies' are the object of worship, rituals and periodic sacrifices on their part. Unable to fulfil these duties, the people felt vulnerable and weakened both spiritually and physically.

"There was our river at the time, the genie is called GBADJO. It's a woman, she's black like that! if you see her breasts, it's 'tchôkô'. But there they are again. The river Gbadjo, they haven't compensated yet.

We're on it. There used to be fish there, but I didn't pay for fish before. Today, there's the mine, there's their factory and Gbadjô is in the middle. They haven't destroyed it yet, it's there. You should have seen the fish we used to earn there. One day, Mr K. (a mine agent) came to see me there, he said aaah Mr Kouadio, I understand why you don't want to leave here, djaaa you eat well! This river belongs to our Wonda family. They draw water from it and then wash their gold. They take the water from it and then they wash their gold".

This description of "Gbadjô", the river genie personified here by Mr Kouadio, shows the familiarity these people have with these supernatural beings. For some, the elements of nature are described as members of their families.

"You know what DEKPA means? In the Dida language, it means 'this is my relative'. Now, my maternal relative is called DEKPA. That's the name there. So this was our parent, this is where we used to go to get food to eat. When you don't have anything, your uncle gives you something to eat. If your dad didn't give you anything, or if your dad didn't send you to school with us, your uncle would take you to school. So this was our happy place. But today we're not doing anything with it yet.

Or I'm even talking to you, there are people in there... the tourists, they come there, they do everything, and then we don't know anything. If you want to go there, you can't, they've closed down".

This extract shows how the local people see Dékpa. It is a forest acquired by the mine but protected from exploitation for ecological reasons due to the presence of certain endemic plant species. Access is therefore controlled by the mine and forbidden to any local human activity. It has been developed for certain leisure activities. For some local residents, however, it is regarded as a "maternal parent". It was also a source of food during the lean seasons.

3-5-2 Installation of the Mine as a Factor in Changing Relationships with the Land

Land is an important asset in Dida societies. It is passed down from generation to generation within families. Every individual is therefore attached to a parcel of land as soon as he or she is a member of a family. It is all these family plots that make up the territory of each village.

"When we say Dida, we mean land. If you don't have land, you're nothing, you're nobody. My father never sold land because land is for life, it's for all generations. That's why we found it here. And I, in turn, have been entrusted with managing it. It's not for me alone, but as at the moment I'm the one in front of the family to manage it, I'm obliged to do it that way. So I had to go on strike. Because I didn't want them to take

my field. I wasn't selling my field". Interview with the head of a family.

On this basis, depriving a family of this heritage is tantamount to depriving them of the status of landowner with which "every good Dida" identifies, as one head of family put it: "When we say Dida, we mean the land. If you don't have land, you're nothing, you're nobody". Land is therefore the element that justifies the Dida's social category. This is why it was not sold and why its management was entrusted to a family member who was its guarantor.

3-5-3 Installation of AGO as a Factor in Changing the Socio-Economic Conditions of the Populations Affected

The expectations raised by the installation of the mine were essentially focused on reducing poverty and improving the standard of living of the local population. These people primarily rely on agriculture for their livelihood. For a long time, the Divo department was considered to be the "granary" of Côte d'Ivoire because of its high agricultural potential and the size of its harvests, which were exported to several towns in the country, Nassa (2021). This reputation is largely due to its geographical location and the fertility of its soils. In 2016, for example, it was estimated that there were more than 70,000 farms in the region, compared with 10,026,564 nationally, according to the 2015/2016 Census of Farmers and Agricultural Holdings (REEA). However, AGO's mining activities at Agbaou have had an impact on agriculture because of its monopolisation of 334 km² of cultivated land.

"The cocoa fields were on this side (occupied by the mine). The mine took several hectares from the Agbahoulaise population. So our fields of cocoa, coffee, cashew nuts and everything else we could grow were destroyed. We also grew maize, rice, cucumbers, cabbage and tomatoes. Now they've ruined everything, we have no more land. My father had 30 to 40 hectares. They've taken everything. Where are you going to farm? There's not even any land left. We don't have any more land, we're looking for land ourselves. It's difficult! It's difficult Interview with the head of a family in Agbahou.

The presence of the mine is also a strong attraction for able-bodied workers, as it offers a higher alternative source of income than that obtained on the plantations. A day's work at the mine is worth 4,000 CFA francs, compared with 1,000 CFA francs a day for a farm labourer. This situation contributes to reducing the workforce on the plantations and does not encourage the creation of new plantations or the maintenance of old ones. It also leads to a drop in production and in farmers' incomes. The direct result is higher food prices.

"Today, first of all there's the high cost of living. They've taken your field, the maize there, they've taken it at 10 francs, the banana there, well formed there they've taken it at 30 0 francs and with all the waste that's next door. So when they take that and then compensate you for, say, 3 million, that's what you were eating, so you'll have to go to the market to buy the same banana that they've spoilt on your land. Now, if you don't have any more bananas and that's the money you have, how can you spend it? Because you no longer have a field. When they've paid 200 francs for a banana tree, you go to the market, and the women place 3 bananas at 100 francs, so the money can't do anything". Interview with a women's group leader.

In addition, the presence of the mine has led to large-scale immigration of people (both Ivoirians and foreigners) and the exodus of young people from the villages working at the mine to the town of Hiré, thus swelling the population of this locality. The town council puts the number of inhabitants at 31,000 in 2014, compared with 51,000 in 2016. However, there is also a second mining site and artisanal gold miners in the area. This population influx has led to inflation in the cost of housing and foodstuffs.

"Another problem with the mine is that house prices have gone up. Before, you could rent a studio for 3,000, now it's 6,000. So it's really difficult.

Even for land, we used to rent a hectare for 6,000 francs. Today, if you don't have 35 miles, often even 40,000 or 45,000, you can't get the land. You can't even find more to rent". Interview with a foreigner in Agbaou.

3-5-4 Establishment of AGO as and Accentuation of Social Inequalities

The establishment of the mine creates expectations on the part of the local population. They all want to benefit from the mining project in the form of jobs, money and advantages in exchange for occupying and using the land or resources in general. But it has to be said that, on the whole, these expectations are not being met.

There are two main reasons for this. On the one hand, expectations are much higher than what a mining project can actually generate, and on the other, the lack of dialogue between communities and other stakeholders helps to keep expectations high and to make the social investments actually made in the communities inadequate.

Furthermore, access to the benefits of a mining project and the distribution of these benefits are often sources of conflict. The effects of the mine's presence are not felt in the same way by every member of the local community. People fight over the benefits, in particular the jobs linked to the mining project. On the

one hand, the indigenous people in some villages say they have been short-changed in terms of compensation to the benefit of non-indigenous people; on the other hand, non-indigenous people complain that they are not taken into account when recruitment takes place at the mine.

Foreigners don't have access to jobs at the mine. When we say foreigners, we mean non-natives and non-natives too. In any case, apart from the Dida, the others have no access to jobs at the mine. Although we all played a part in the creation of this village, our fields have also been affected by the mine. Foreigners have no access to the mine. The person representing the mine here is someone from the community (Dida). We don't get the information that everyone else does, so it's up to them over there, so we're just here". Interview with an official from the Agbaou non-indigenous and immigrant communities.

Finally, there is a disproportionate impact on women, as it is usually men who are consulted when companies negotiate access to land, compensation or other benefits. This exclusive logic increases existing social inequalities and accentuates women's economic dependence on men.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the environment, people's actions are legitimised by belief systems, norms and values that reflect the culture to which they belong and the social environment in which they live. The analysis of social representations can therefore lead to an understanding of social behaviour and reactions to a social object. This is the focus of this article, which addresses the specific case of AGO's mining project. We have attempted to understand the factors that explain the existence of conflicts between this mining company and the neighbouring communities by questioning their social representations of their environment and their perceptions of this activity.

All in all, this study showed that the people in the communities affected had an idyllic view of their environment before AGO was set up. This environment fulfilled a number of social and economic functions. It also emerges that the installation of the mine was perceived by these communities as a factor in improving their living conditions. However, it appears that the local communities' perception of the mine remains mixed, given the social, economic and environmental changes brought about by its presence and which they face on a daily basis.

At the end of this study, we can therefore state that our initial hypothesis has been verified in that the representations and perceptions described explain the recurrence of conflicts between AGO and the local communities.

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