

**“THE MANY WATERS OF BAMBOI, GHANA”: AN AFRICAN
FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY OF INTERSECTIONALITY AND
WATER GOVERNANCE**

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Abstract

This thesis interrogates the universalised assumptions underpinning gender mainstreaming in global water governance frameworks – particularly SDG 6 and Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) – and demonstrates their inadequacy for explaining the complex, relational, and intersectional dynamics of water governance in Bamboi, northern Ghana. Although gender mainstreaming is framed as essential to achieving global development goals, its operationalisation obscures the multiple socio-cultural categories that shape participation in decision-making. Drawing on African feminisms, feminist political ecology (FPE), and (epistemological) cultural relativism, the study adopts a decolonial feminist ethnography to examine how gender, power, cosmology, and intersectional identities interact within Bamboi’s waterscape.

The study demonstrates that mainstream feminisms – often positioned as universal – insufficiently reflect the lived realities and socio-cultural dynamics of diverse societies. This critique guided the study’s overall question: What prospects do African feminisms, FPE, and epistemological cultural relativism offer for decolonising water governance? Relatedly, four sub-questions were generated: What are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how do they manifest in Bamboi? Who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi? How do local and customary institutions interact with formal water governance institutions? And how are local and customary institutions gendered?

The study responded to these questions in four analytical chapters: Four to Seven. The first analytical chapter relied on primary and secondary data to explore the BVR and the making of Bamboi. The empirical analysis reveals that water governance in Bamboi is historically situated within transitions from autochthonous custodianship to colonial and contemporary state control,

producing enduring political and infrastructural inequalities. The second analytical chapter revealed that everyday access, authority, and participation in water decision-making are shaped less by gender alone and more by intersecting factors including age, kinship, ethnicity, marital status, economic status, migration history, and spiritual legitimacy. The third analytical chapter looked at the localised worldviews and layers of water resource stewardship in Bamboi. This chapter shows that local governance systems – anchored in cosmological worldviews, ritual stewardship, and the Water Priesthood – coexist with, resist, and sometimes complement formal state-led arrangements, generating a dynamic form of institutional (water) bricolage. The final analytical chapter employs FPE to unravel the fluid gender of the BVR and the gendered dynamics of the village's water decisions, demonstrating that the BVR is conceptualised as a sentient, gendered being whose fluid personhood – variously feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral – shapes extraction practices, moral regulation, and stewardship responsibilities. This challenges Western gender binaries and affirms African feminist critiques of epistemic homogenisation. The chapter further documents the historical agency of Bamboi's Women's Committee (WoC), whose adjudicatory authority disrupts prevailing narratives of African women's passivity and highlights the limits of quota-based gender reforms.

Overall, the study argues that decolonising water governance requires moving beyond universalised gender templates toward context-attuned, intersectional, and cosmologically informed approaches. It concludes that African feminisms and FPE provide analytically robust frameworks for reimagining gender, participation, and power in natural resource governance. The thesis offers methodological, theoretical, and policy insights for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers seeking to align water governance with lived realities across African contexts.

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This PhD journey has been the opposite of the West African “crabs-in-a-container” folktale, where each crab pulls the other down. Instead, it has resembled the steady growth of the baobab tree – nourished not by solitary effort but by the deep, generous roots of a whole community. At every stage, I was held, strengthened, and lifted by the many hands, hearts, and minds that made it possible for me to stand tall and complete this work. Guided first by divine grace and then by human kindness, I owe this journey to many hands and hearts.

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Like the baobab tree, this work stands tall because its roots run deep into the love, wisdom, and generosity of many.

Dedication

This scholarship is dedicated to my mother Linda (Adwoa Oye) Ansah who “never” had a mother to hold her hand through education but always held mine through the various levels of my formal education. I am a product of her dedication, hard work, follow-ups and faith in the girl child. Without her, I could only dream of being a scholar.

List of acronyms

AU	African Union
BPA	Bui Power Authority
BSA	British Sociological Association
BVR	Black Volta River
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CWSA	Community Water and Sanitation Agency
DC	Development Committee
EXIM	Export and Import (Bank)
FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
GAD	Gender and Development
GES	Ghana Education Service
GoG	Government of Ghana
GWA	Gender and Water Alliance
GWCL	Ghana Water Company Limited
HSD	Hydrological Service Department
IDI(s)	In-depth Interview(s)
IWRM	Integrated Water Resources Management
ICWE	International Conference on Water and the Environment
KII(s)	Key Informant Interview(s)
MoGCSP	Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection
MMDAs	Metropolitan, Municipal and District Assemblies

MoH	Ministry of Health
MWRWH	Ministry of Water Resources, Works and Housing
NDC	National Democratic Congress
NDPC	National Development Planning Commission
NPP	New Patriotic Party
OPD	Out Patient Department
PE	Political Ecology
	Simon Diedong Dombo-University for Business and Integrated Development
SDD-UBIDS	Studies
SDG(s)	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
TCPD	Town and Country Planning Department
TTFPP	Third Trimester Field Practical Programme
UDS	University for Development Studies
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VR	Village Respondent
VRA	Volta River Authority
WAD	Women and Development
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WATSAN	Water and Sanitation (Committee)
WGF	Water Governance Facility
WHO	World Health Organisation

WID	Women in Development
WRC	Water Resources Commission
WoC	Women's Committee
WWAP	World Water Assessment Programme

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement	iv
Dedication	vi
List of acronyms	vii
List of figures	xvi
List of tables	xviii
CHAPTER ONE	1
1.1 Establishing the research context, background and gap	9
1.2 Studying water from an African feminist and intersectional perspective	13
1.3 Objective and research questions	16
1.4 Scope of the study	18
1.5 Thesis contributions	20
1.6 Organisation of the study	24
CHAPTER TWO	27
2 Towards an African feminist political ecology of water governance	27
2.0 Introduction	27
2.1 Synthetising the conceptual relationship among the key concepts	30
2.2 Situating gender within the water governance discourse	33
2.3 Framing waterscape and institutional bricolage in the water governance (of Ghana)	48
2.4 IWRM governance in Ghana and Bamboi	54
2.5 Setting the decolonial premises	57
2.5.1 Recentring gender in development: GAD, African feminisms and intersectionality	58
2.5.2 Decolonising feminism(s): the paradigms of African feminisms	61
2.5.3 Ghana; a case for understanding African feminisms and the hegemony in water governance	80
2.6 Feminist political ecology (FPE) as steps beyond political ecology (PE)	82
2.7 Decoloniality, feminism(s) and cultural relativism: tensions and similarities	86
2.8 Conclusion of the chapter	91
CHAPTER THREE	95

3 Undertaking (decolonial feminist) ethnography in Bamboi, Ghana	95
3.0 Introduction	95
3.1 Designing and undertaking a (decolonial feminists’) ethnography in Bamboi, Bole District	96
3.2 Research positionality.....	102
3.3 Choosing the ethnographic field, Bamboi	104
3.4 Study population, unit of analysis, sampling and sample size determination	105
3.5 Data collection methods and instruments	107
3.5.1 Doing fieldwork.....	107
3.5.2 Participant observation	111
3.5.3 In-depth interviews (IDIs) with Key Informants (KIs)	112
3.5.4 Auxiliary data collection methods	113
3.6 Obtaining ethical clearance and ensuring an ethical ethnography.....	116
3.7 Planning village entry and gaining access to participants.....	118
3.8 Staying and researching in Bamboi	119
3.8.1 Arriving at the ethnographic site – Bamboi	120
3.8.2 Processes of village entry and immersion.....	121
3.8.3 Meeting the “caretaker” Chief and the palace council of elders	124
3.8.4 Meeting the Bamboi hankoor (Queen mother) and her elders	126
3.8.5 Meeting the “River/Water Priest”	128
3.8.6 Meeting the “River/Water Narrator”	129
3.9 Negotiating power relations in decolonial feminist ethnography	132
3.10 Exploring field challenges	134
3.10.1 Intersectional challenges and language barriers.....	134
3.10.2 Navigating ethnography, ethics and ethical approval boundaries	136
3.10.3 Localising and communicating research objectives	137
3.10.4 Managing post-field relationships and bereavement of key participants	138
3.10.5 Everyday living challenges	138
3.11 Exiting Bamboi.....	139
3.12 Data management.....	140
3.13 Data processing and discussions	141

3.14 Data presentation	145
3.15 Context setting: Bamboi within the Bole District Assembly	145
3.15.1 The context of water governance in Bamboi	149
3.16 Conclusion of the chapter	153
CHAPTER FOUR.....	155
4 The nature of the waterscape of the Black Volta River – “Nnaa Moo” and the framing of Bamboi	155
4.0 Introduction	155
4.1 Premising the waterscape of Bamboi.....	156
4.2 Ground and surface water resources of Ghana.....	157
4.2.1 Groundwater in Ghana and the nature of access in Bamboi.....	159
4.2.2 Surface water in Ghana and how they shape local systems.....	163
4.3 The Volta River System (in Ghana).....	168
4.4 Drivers of politics in the waterscape of Ghana.....	172
4.4.1 Political prioritisation	174
4.4.2 Rural and urban hydropower electrification and demands	176
4.4.3 Competing water resource rights and claims	182
4.4.4 Modern infrastructure development	184
4.5 Understanding the waterscape of Bamboi: The Black Volta River and the making of Bamboi	187
4.6 Conclusion of the chapter	203
CHAPTER FIVE	206
5 Everyday water institutions and the intersectional experiences in the multiple waterscapes of Bamboi	206
5.0 Introduction	206
5.1 The spaces of water decision-making in Bamboi.....	207
5.1.1 Water service provision	211
5.1.2 Water safeguarding	215
5.2 Processes of everyday decisions in Bamboi	217
5.2.1 What factors matter?.....	218
5.3 Intersecting matters and stories in decision-making	221

5.3.1 Age as a double-edged intersectional category	228
5.3.2 Sex and gender in shaping intersectional experiences	230
5.3.3 Marriage, kinship and family ties in shaping intersectional experiences	232
5.3.4 Perceived knowledge and education level in intersectional experiences	235
5.3.5 Economic and social statuses in shaping intersectional experiences	238
5.3.6 Social perception in shaping intersectional experiences	240
5.3.7 Fluid intersectional experiences shaped by ethnicity and migration	241
5.3.8 The intersectional experiences shaped by personality	250
5.3.9 Religion in shaping intersectional experiences	254
5.3.10 Political affiliation to 'power-in-power' or 'opposition' in shaping intersectional experiences	255
5.3.11 Other factors (such as language) in shaping intersectional experiences.....	256
5.4 Conclusion of the chapter	258
CHAPTER SIX.....	260
6 Localised worldviews and layers of (natural) water resource stewardship in Bamboi ..	260
6.0 Introduction	260
6.1 Water decision-making: the perspectives of localised worldviews	262
6.1.1 Cosmic worldviews and the ethic of stewardship	263
6.2 Local framing of water in Bamboi.....	267
6.2.1 Water as a sacred and supernatural entity in Bamboi.....	272
6.2.2 Cultural perspectives on water in Bamboi	275
6.2.3 Water as personalities in Bamboi	276
6.2.4 Norm-shaped water pollution in Bamboi	279
6.3 Layers of natural (water) stewardship in Bamboi	284
6.3.1 The Village Water Governance Systems (VWGS).....	288
6.3.2 The Koorafon and water resources in Bamboi.....	292
6.3.3 The sanctification/purification of water resources in Bamboi.....	295
6.3.4 Discussion of sanctifications of the water resources in the village	301
6.4 Water bricolage: the interplay of localised and non-localised worldviews in water decision-making.....	303
6.4.1 Forms of water bricolage in Bamboi	308

6.4.2 Tensions and negotiations between customary and state-led governance	309
6.5 Conclusion of the chapter	310
CHAPTER SEVEN	314
7 Gendered cosmologies, power and water governance: An (African) feminist political ecology of Bamboi	314
7.0 Introduction	314
7.1 The contradictions between gendered public narratives and actual practices on water decisions	316
7.2 The stool of the Water/River Priestess “Kooraa Yaa Kuma” and water decision-making	320
7.2.1 Selecting the water/river priestess	324
7.2.2 The role of the water/river priestess	325
7.3 The metaphoric gender of the Black Volta River – “Nnaa Moo”	329
7.4 African feminism organising: the organic evolution of the Bamboi Women’s Committee	335
7.5 Silencing and silence: a tool for shaming and maintaining dignity and assertiveness	339
7.6 Conclusion of the chapter	343
CHAPTER EIGHT	346
8 Major findings and conclusion	346
8.0 Introduction	346
8.1 Major research findings.....	352
8.1.1 The dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how they manifest in Bamboi	352
8.1.2 Actors and categories that shape and control Bamboi’s waterscape	353
8.1.3 The interactions between local/customary and formal water governance institutions	355
8.1.4 How local and customary institutions are gendered	359
8.2 Policy implications.....	361
8.3 Study limitation and directions for future research	364
8.4 Concluding remarks	366
References	369

Appendices	432
Appendix A	432
Profile of Deg/Mo language in thesis.....	432
Appendix B.....	433
Interview guide	433
Appendix C	435
Observation guide	435
Appendix D	436
List of planned Key Informant Interviews (15/01/2023)	436
Appendix E.....	438
Field gaps report	438
Appendix F	442
Participatory map of Bamboi	442
Appendix G	443
Letter of invitation to research data validation forum	443
Appendix H	444
Pictures gallery	444

List of figures

Figure 1: Conceptual relationships among key variables; AF, FPE and (E)CR	30
Figure 2: Roadmap to ethnographic fieldwork in Bamboi, Bole District - Ghana	108
Figure 3: Field notebook of Bamboi	110
Figure 4: A random informal conversation in Bamboi	115
Figure 5: With my native research assistant, waiting to meet the Council of Palace elders	122
Figure 6: Informal conversation with a group of commercial water contractors at the BVR...	124
Figure 7: First meeting with Bamboi’s Chief’s representative and the council of elders	125
Figure 8: Picture gallery of the Bamboi Palace	126
Figure 9: Map of Bole District, showing its towns and villages including Bamboi.....	147
Figure 10: Groundwater extraction in Bamboi.....	160
Figure 11: Rainwater harvesting and storage in Bamboi	161
Figure 12: Dynamics of Ghana’s River System	164
Figure 13: Map of Ghana indicating the major rivers and water bodies	166
Figure 14: The Volta Basin in West Africa	169
Figure 15: The Volta Rivers basin showing major rivers and dams.....	171
Figure 16: Water interests in Ghana	173
Figure 17: The first BPA-Bamboi stakeholder consultation post-dam construction.....	179
Figure 18: An interview with a “disappointed” fisherman.....	182
Figure 19: Polluted gullies a few meters to the BVR	187
Figure 20: The Volta Basin showing Bamboi and other flow stations	188
Figure 21: A view of the Black Volta River and Bamboi Bridge from the riverbank at Bamboi	190
Figure 22: Physical and Social Environment Map of Bamboi.....	192
Figure 23: A view of a typical day in Bamboi	193
Figure 24: North Mo Traditional Council’s Office – Bamboi	194
Figure 25: The BVR and other surface water sources in Bamboi	199
Figure 26: Bamboi amidst the water-society interactions	201
Figure 27: Institutional arrangements for water policy implementation	208
Figure 28: Spaces of water decisions in Bamboi	210
Figure 29: Actors of water service provision	212

Figure 30: Sample of non-functioning boreholes scattered across Bamboi	214
Figure 31: Intra and inter intersectional analysis categories	222
Figure 32: Fluid intersectional categories in water decision-making in Bamboi.....	224
Figure 33: A village forum on the small-scale mining and matters arising in Bamboi	227
Figure 34: Samples of individual water supply with multiple storages in Bamboi.....	239
Figure 35: Randomly meeting Matthew carrying water on his head from the BVR one hot afternoon	243
Figure 36: The Fulbe men-dominated Cattle market on Saturdays at Bamboi	245
Figure 37: The road to one of the “fringes” of the Fulbe settlements	246
Figure 38: A group of Fulbe women fetching water from the Suukɔrl while a herd of cattle drink on the other side	248
Figure 39: Two Fulbe women trading in a female-dominated business (dairy products sale) by the Fulbe in Bamboi.....	249
Figure 40: A “rare” opportunity of meeting members of the DC in one of their meetings	253
Figure 41: Moments of water and Schnapp libation before meetings.....	264
Figure 42: Phases of inclusion and exclusion in key water decision role (Priesthood) in Bamboi	271
Figure 43: A young woman (third from left) drinking directly from the BVR while fetching from the river	273
Figure 44: Interacting with the laundrywoman at the BVR on the norms of surface water pollution	281
Figure 45: Interacting with a woman at the Suukɔrl pond on the norms of different surface water pollution	283
Figure 46: Participatory illustration of layers of natural resource stewardship in Bamboi	287
Figure 47: Water governance pathways in Bamboi	291
Figure 48: Attributes of the water bricolage in Bamboi	305
Figure 49: Phases of selecting the river/water priestess of Bamboi	325
Figure 50: The stool of the Koora Yaa Kumah (water priestess) at her residence.....	326
Figure 51: Pictorial summary of the thesis	351

List of tables

Table 1: Global-Ghana policy frameworks and positions on gender and IWRM.....	36
Table 2: Sources of water, the nature and scale of access and control politics in Ghana	53
Table 3: Field data categorisation and analysis	143
Table 4: Existing and planned hydroelectric power dams in the Volta Basin in Ghana	178

CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction to the study

Over several decades, a diverse range of critical scholarship has challenged the hegemonic universalisation of Western framings within “Gender and Development” (GAD). However, these framings still dominate, especially in their problematic gazes and representation of women in non-Western societies such as Africa. These narratives often cast African women as passive subjects in perpetual need of external “empowerment” (Bedigen et al., 2021). My early academic training in Ghana reproduced these gazes and assumptions: mainstream feminist literature positioned African women as uniformly oppressed and in need of Western-style empowerment akin to the trajectories of white, middle-class women in the Europe and the West.

Whilst this academic grounding in Ghana shaped my analytical skills to recognise the widespread and deep-rooted gender inequalities across the world, the framing reinforced black female victimhood and the uncritical reproduction of Western feminist literature and categorisations in African universities. This gaze fostered the expectations that gender equality – in theory and practice – must mirror Western experiences. This assumption erases context, ontology and epistemic diversity. Such imaginings were further reinforced by policy. For example, a draft report from the United Nations post-2015 development agenda (UN, 2015) outline a strong commitment on gender equality. The excerpt below captures the foundational spirit of the agenda:

“[...] Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. [...] The systematic

mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda is crucial.”
(UN, 2015, p.6)

The study is particularly drawn to this quotation as it entails the “spirit” of the United Nation’s gender equality agenda and exemplifies gendered intentions embedded within global development agendas. Whilst this shapes gender equality operationalisation in member states including Ghana, it implicitly presents men and boys as universally empowered and women and girls as universally disempowered. This discourse underpins gender mainstreaming efforts in Sustainable Development Goal – SDG 5 and 6, including SDG 6.5 on Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM), where gender is operationalised primarily as the insertion of women into formal structures.

My subsequent engagement with African feminisms and decolonial thought unsettled these universalised gender and development imaginaries. Through this intellectual shift, I began to question how global development goals commonly presented as universal, are deeply rooted in Western epistemologies; a hegemony that silences non-Western worldviews and epistemic processes (Tamale, 2020). The interrogation of GAD (in its theory and practice) through this decolonial lens and observation of the everydayness of daring and assertive characters of women I had encountered in both matrilineal and patrilineal cultural settings across Ghana reinforced two fundamental insights: first, that not all men are empowered nor all women oppressed; and second, that gender is not a fixed biological attribute but a performative, socially produced and fluid phenomenon (Butler, 2004; West and Zimmerman, 1987). This aligns with what I develop later in the thesis regarding the fluid gendering of the Black Volta River (BVR), which moves beyond binaries and illustrates how local cosmologies exceed rigid Western gender constructs.

My introspection aligns with Ndofirepi and Ndofirepi's (2020) critique that African Universities remain silent on African epistemologies while "loud" about Western epistemologies; a situation that sustains long-standing hegemonies of knowledge production. Such reflections raised critical questions: Why are conceptualisations and practices of GAD in Ghana not grounded in African feminist epistemologies? Why do they instead rely so heavily on Western feminist histories and narratives? Is it the power of Eurocentric knowledge production and hegemony in academia and practice of development?

This led me to engage Maria Lugones' arguments in *Toward a Decolonial Feminism* which traces the colonial imposition of gender cuts across questions of ecology, economics, governance, worldviews, the relationship between people and the spirit world, and knowledge production and consumption (Lugones, 2010). Similarly, Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters Female Husbands; Gender and Sex in an African Society* and Oyeronke Oyewumi's (1997) *The invention of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses* illustrate how rigid gender binaries were not foundational to many African societies prior to colonial encounters (Oyewumi, 1997; Amadiume, 1987). This scholarship, alongside Manning (2025; 2021), Vergès (2021), Tamale (2020), Mendez (2015) and others have roundly drawn attention to how scholarship and global development agenda (for example the then Millennium Development Goals-MDGs and now SDGs), continue to silence non-Western worldviews while being presented as universally valid. To address this epistemic lacuna, this PhD draws on concepts and theories rooted in decoloniality including African feminisms (spanning Womanism, Africana Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, Nego-feminism, intersectionality, and others), (epistemological) cultural relativism, and feminist political ecology (FPE), to unpack the complexities of gender in African contexts, with specific attention to Ghana. My use of intersectionality is reflexive rather than "routinised" – a point

emphasised by Ahmed (2013) – to avoid turning it into a “buzzword” emptied of analytical depth. Instead, intersectionality is treated as experiential, grounded in how people navigate power, authority, kinship, cosmology, and resource governance. In Chapter Two, I elaborate the diversity and similarities within African societies to avoid oversimplification and essentialism.

To move beyond hegemonic Western epistemologies, this study employed a (decolonial feminist) ethnography (Manning, 2018) that enabled deep immersion within the everyday lives of the residents of Bamboi, a village in northern Ghana. This ethnographic approach provided rich insights into intersectional and non-Western framings embedded in the governance of the “many waters” of the village. Water governance is a particularly important site for analysis because SDG 6.5 (IWRM) provides a checklist for monitoring gender mainstreaming in water resources management at different levels (UNEP-DHI, 2025; Bertule et al., 2018). Whilst the use of “gender” in these frameworks appear gendered inclusive (of female and males), they prioritise the mainstreaming girls and women, feeding into SDG 5 (“Gender Equality”), and inadvertently obscure more complex intersectional realities of differently positioned people.

Meanwhile, Bukachi et al. (2021) remind us that even among women, experiences of water access differ along lines of age, marital status, income, remittance and land ownership. Thus, it is crucial to ask: Whose notion of gender equality underpins global goals and their universalised? It is at this point that engaging decolonial critiques makes visible the intersectional complexities that such gender mainstreaming frameworks fail to capture in practice. Consequently, this PhD explores how Westernised and Eurocentric knowledge systems shape gender narratives and gazes within water governance. In so doing, the study African feminisms (and intersectionality), (epistemological) cultural relativism, and FPE to unpack how gender, water, and decision-making intersect in Bamboi. By extension, this study aligns with recent empirical scholarship (Sultana,

2021; Truelove, 2019; Narayanaswamy, 2016; 2014), all of which critique mainstream feminist assumptions that centre women's inclusion as synonymous with gender equality. They are hegemonic, inadequate and problematic.

The study demonstrates how global agendas like the SDGs can misrepresent or mis-situate gender in local contexts such as Ghana. This is particularly concerning as the SDGs often inform national planning and attract development funding in countries considered to be low-income such as Ghana. Their implementation reinforces Western imaginaries of gender equality. This thesis therefore reimagines gender through African feminisms and decolonial perspectives, using everyday interactions in Bamboi to reveal how inclusion and exclusion in water decision-making challenge universalist assumptions. Through the engagement of “waterscape” scholarship (which is unpacked further in Chapter Two), the study shows that water–society interactions are shaped by socio-cultural norms, politics, and geography (Karpouzoglou and Vij, 2017). Situated within this interaction is unequal power relations that can produce unequal and gendered outcomes (Karpouzoglou and Vij, 2017; Truelove, 2011).

The uniqueness of this study lies in situating African feminisms and (epistemological) cultural relativism within the broader framework of FPE to interrogate Bamboi's waterscape. Whilst FPE emerged largely from the scholarship of Western academics, such as Dianne Rocheleau, a Professor Emerita of Geography at the Clark University in the United States and her colleagues, it has since expanded to incorporate decoloniality and diverse worldviews. Although the central focus of FPE dwells on how gender interacts in the whole continuum of resource governance, contemporary scholarship examines how intersectional categories – rather than just gender – influence power in natural resource governance (Alhassan et al., 2024; Sultan, 2021; Adams et al., 2018; Cole, 2017). African feminists (Oyewumi, 2003; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Collins, 1990;

Crenshaw, 1989) similarly highlight that socio relations, cultural norms, and micro-politics produce deeply gendered outcomes. When these frameworks are combined to analyse water governance, it will reveal the pathways of control decisions and benefits.

Although the empirical studies on FPE usually focus on the intersections of female participation in water decision-making, this study resists oversimplistic single-category analysis. Such approaches risk assuming that exclusion stems solely from gender identity, whereas experiences in Bamboi reveal that ethnicity, kinship, age, marital status, socio-economic status, political affiliation, and other markers shape access and authority. Meanwhile, Cole (2017) draws attention to the heterogeneity of the lived experiences of people related to water issues. Hence, it is simplistic to assume that all men have the power to participate in water decision-making. Like Cole (2017), I do not intend to dismiss the peculiarity of gender inequality and gaps in the overall decision-making and the lived experiences of women in water issues in formal and informal spaces in Africa. Hence, whilst acknowledging persistent gender inequality, I show that men and women are embedded in dynamic social relationships that inform resource access (Hillesland et al., 2023). This approach makes visible the deeper structural patterns of discrimination embedded within customary institutions such as kinship and chieftaincy.

The study contrasts sharply with developmentalist preview and mainstream feminist approaches that privilege representation participation – often emphasising women’s numerical inclusion in water committees. However, such committees – often expected to function as the local translation of “formality” (as with the case of Water and Sanitation – WATSAN – Committees, which I expand later in Chapter Two) – are frequently non-functional or merely symbolic. Furthermore, such approaches disregard the politics of participation and socio-cultural dynamics that exclude not only certain women but also many men. As Chapter Five illustrates, intersectional

characteristics shape water decision-making in ways that formal frameworks routinely overlook. This is also evident in Chapter Four, which situates these local dynamics within broader national water governance structures.

The analysis also foregrounds context. Whilst race was central to intersectionality in critiquing Western feminist scholarship by its pioneering framers, its analytical relevance is diminished in racially homogeneous contexts such as Bamboi. In such contexts, ethnicity rather than race structures affinity, authority and social interactions (Msuya, 2019; Nnaemeka, 2004; Collins, 1990). Hence, race is not engaged in the analytical chapters of this study. Nevertheless, this thesis acknowledges the historical legacies of coloniality that connect Africa gender experiences to wider global racialised hierarchies. Therefore, by examining how race, ethnicity and gender intersect in water governance in Africa, this study contributes to ongoing debates on decolonial knowledge production. The next paragraph focuses on dominant water governance frameworks and how they shape gender mainstreaming.

Dominant water governance framework, SDG 6 and IWRM largely conceptualise gender through representation quotas, especially for women. As discussed earlier, this inadequately captures intersectional dynamics of participation and ignores the diverse spaces where decisions occur (Sehring et al., 2022), such as market centres¹, where women often exercise organic authority. In contrast, formal water committees, created to satisfy SDG reporting requirements, frequently become performative (Asamoah and Ile, 2024; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017; Cleaver and Hamada, 2010; Cleaver and Toner, 2006) and disconnected from lived realities.

¹ In Chapter Seven, I unravel the organic evolution and strength of the Bamboi Women's Committee from the traders around the BVR.

Moreover, IWRM's limitations stem from its reliance on universalised models that struggle to adapt to diverse socio-cultural contexts (Evaristo et al., 2023; Biswas, 2008). This divergence reveals a major conceptual tension: IWRM imposes formality, however, the governance of water in Bamboi is fundamentally informal. Global frameworks assume coherent institutions and technocratic management, but lived practice reflects a far more fragmented, relational and plural system. These contradictions are amplified by what I discuss later in Chapter Two (2.4) as the extractive neoliberal tendencies of IWRM, where water is framed as an economic good, subject to pricing, monitoring and technical optimisation. This technocratic commodification sits uneasily alongside the relational, spiritual and ethical ways in which Bamboi residents understand water.

At this point, the question revolves around whether African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism can deepen understanding of the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion in water decision-making. Reflecting on these dynamics in line with decolonial lens is important for analysing water access as socio-politically mediated phenomenon that extends beyond natural scarcity. Academic research provides the framing in which our world is understood in its multiple contexts (Brew and Lucas, 2009). To this end, this study aims to critique two main areas of epistemic hegemony: One, mainstream feminism and its influences which brings Women in Development's (WID) conceptual challenges back to practice by centring women's inclusion as gender equality: and two, western-dominated knowledge production, which universalises these perspectives within global water governance frameworks. Drawing on African feminisms, FPE, and cultural relativism, the study critiques these assumptions and grounds the analysis in everyday life in Bamboi. This reveals the conceptual and practical gaps in how gender inequality is defined and operationalised in water governance.

The next section examines the research context and the overly simplistic framing of gender within water governance policy and practice.

1.1 Establishing the research context, background and gap

Water is often materially understood as a life-sustaining substance and its access framed as a fundamental human right that must be protected by duty-bearers (Gawel and Bretschneider, 2016; UN, 2015; Gleick, 1998). Beyond this essentialist view, global scholarship emphasises the fragility of freshwater systems and their susceptibility to depletion (Molden, 2020; Liu et al., 2017). Due to these concerns, multiple global, regional and national governance efforts, including international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (Salman, 2007), and Human Right to Water and Sanitation (UNGA, 2010) have been enacted. Such frameworks provide normative direction but do not prevent the uneven distribution, access, or control of water across geographies.

The world is presently not water-stressed (Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017), neither would it be by the next decade. Regardless, access to available water remains unequal across contexts in the world (Mehta, 2014) and projected to intensify. For example, the Global Water Institute (2013) warns that 700 million people worldwide may be displaced by 2030 due to water scarcity. These disparities are also stark within countries. In Ghana for instance, national water stress is low, but internal spatial inequalities are acute: freshwater is relatively abundant in the southern regions but comparatively scarce in the northern savannah zones (Government of Ghana, 2019). Access to available water is further differentiated along socio-cultural and economic lines such as cost, infrastructure, gender, caste, ethnicity, and age (Mehta, 2014). These conditions are further exacerbated for the poor and socially marginalised. Unequal access to water has the potential to

compromise health, wellbeing, economic participation, human rights and development (Abanyie et al., 2023; Sultana and Loftus, 2015).

As a result, there is a consensus that reversing adverse environmental changes that impact water resource availability is desirable (Morrison et al., 2019). Premised on these complexities, scholarship shows that scarcity and access are not solely matters of physical availability but of governance – shaped by political prioritisation, institutional capacity, technology, financing arrangements, and socio-cultural norms (Mdee et al., 2024; Yeleliere et al., 2018; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017; Mehta, 2014; Osumanu et al., 2014). Significantly for this thesis, these governance processes embody both formal and informal structures and practices, a tension that becomes central to understanding the lived realities of water users in Bamboi. As discussed earlier, the IWRM framework currently dominates water governance globally. It seeks to coordinate competing water uses, promote “efficiency, equity and sustainability”, reorient supply-driven models towards market-centred system (often through pricing), and enhance user participation (Adjakloe, 2021; Yeleliere et al., 2018; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017).

However, the SDGs and the IWRM framework have been extensively problematised for their technocratic and depoliticised assumptions, which overlook the fragmented, context-specific and power-laden dynamics of water access (Adjakloe, 2021; Gondo et al., 2019b; Mdee and Harrison, 2019; Morrison et al., 2019). Furthermore, the technocratic underpinnings of the IWRM and SDG 6 – which I elaborate further in Chapter Two – position water as an economic good, promoting commodification, and privileging technical optimisation over non-economical dynamics that are relational, situated, spiritual and rooted in local and customary forms of stewardship. Although relevant nationally, these frameworks have even less traction in settings like Bamboi, where

governance is diffused, informal, and deeply shaped by cultural worldviews and social relations. The next paragraph situates gender within the IWRM and SDG 6.

Globally, gender mainstreaming – which is an important component of SDG 6 – remains influential in policy responses to uneven water access. Numerous studies link domestic water responsibilities to women and young girls (Abanyie et al., 2025; Nordström and Widman, 2022; Jeil et al., 2020; Mehta, 2014), reinforcing the idea that women’s participation in water governance is both practical and strategic (see Moser, 1989). This association is frequently extended to justify women’s inclusion in water committees, particularly in rural contexts where water collection labour is feminised. However, this view of women collapses complex social realities into a singular narrative. Meanwhile, whilst women often bear the burden of water collection, they are not a homogenous group.

Regardless, Adams et al. (2018) have argued that vulnerable groups such as children, the aged, and persons with disability mostly rely on women for domestic and caregiving purposes due to the socially constructed reproductive roles associated with females. Due to this constructed role, Adams et al. (2018) have argued that women’s participation in water decisions can potentially escalate the needs of vulnerable groups in water decisions. Although this resonates with the realities of many females in rural and urban spaces in low-income countries such as Ghana, Adams et al.’s (2018) assumption implies that poor water access are relatively caused by a lack of women’s representation in water decision-making. However, such assumption is inadequate and empirically weak (see Kolipaka et al., 2026; Cleaver and Hamada, 2010; Cleaver and Toner, 2006). This is because water governance processes involve technical, political and administrative dynamics that exceed representational solutions.

This study therefore unpacks the intersectional experiences embedded in water economy, highlighting that inclusion/exclusion in water decision-making is not shaped only by sex categories but by a combination of intersecting identities – age, ethnicity, kinship, political affiliation, economic capacity, and social networks. The next paragraph locates the gaps within the rhetorics of women and water governance in Ghana.

Current debates in Ghana reflect the gender tensions in SDG 6 and IWRM. This is because targets of the SDGs, such as 6.5.1 dominates national level water policy framing and gender mainstreaming in Ghana (GWP, 2022). Whilst women form the backbone of domestic water management, their participation in formal decision-making remains limited (Dery et al., 2025; Kosoe et al., 2025; Alhassan et al., 2024; Dery et al., 2021; Fielmua and Mwingyine, 2018; Boateng and Kendie, 2015; MoGCSP, 2015; Boateng et al., 2013; Opare, 2005). However, focusing solely on “women” limits gender-based research in three ways by obscuring: intra-group differences, which shape who among women can participate and whose voices carry authority; structural and micro-politics, which constrain both men and women based on intersecting identities; and the influence of Western feminist frames, which decouple “gender” from localised intersections and equate inclusion with empowerment. These simplifications often divert attention away from the state’s responsibility in addressing infrastructural and political inequities. As outlined earlier, they also overshadow the diverse informal spaces where meaningful water decisions occur (such as market centres, kinship networks), while overemphasising formal committees that are often symbolic, under-resourced, or non-functional.

Based on the above reflections, this research aligns with emerging decolonial feminist scholarship that interrogates how water governance is shaped by local and gendered power relations, cultural worldviews, and unequal access to political spaces (see Hillesland et al., 2023; Narayanaswamy et

al., 2023). To understand these processes, insights from African feminisms (for example, Nnaemeka, 2004; Oyewumi, 2003; 1997; Crenshaw, 1989) and FPE (Sultana, 2021; Truelove, 2019; Adams et al., 2018) are engaged to unpack how intersectional identities and socio-cultural norms structure the politics of resource access and control – far beyond the narrow lens of female representation – are important in exploring the uneven spaces of resource access, control and decision-making beyond women in local government instituted water governance committees.

To this end, this section has situated the research within broader debates about gender, power, water governance and decoloniality by highlighting the conceptual and empirical gaps that make Bamboi a compelling site for understanding the everyday politics of water access and the limitations of dominant global governance frameworks such as the SDG 6 and IWRM.

1.2 Studying water from an African feminist and intersectional perspective

Scholarship on water decision-making consistently highlights that access to, use of, and control over water are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural, historical, environmental, economic, technical and socio-political dynamics. These factors operate at multiple scales – from global governance architectures to the everyday practices of individuals and households – and collectively produce uneven patterns of water access across contexts. At the local level, these dynamics intersect with state-led politics of prioritisation, which often determine where, when, and how water infrastructure is delivered or neglected, especially in developing countries. As Mallette (2013) illustrates, the governance of water is conditioned not only by hydrology or infrastructure but by shifting regimes of ownership – state, private, communal – which structure the political economy of access. Similarly, Wrisdale et al. (2017) demonstrate how historical exclusions and socio-political legacies continue to shape the differentiated experiences of marginalised groups, including older adults and persons with disabilities, in rural South Africa.

Ghana's waterscape reflects these entanglements. As outlined earlier, the Government has integrated SDG 6 and IWRM principles into national development planning frameworks (Government of Ghana, 2019) towards ensuring equitable access to water – now codified as a human right (UNGA, 2010). However, despite these commitments, access to safe and reliable water remains uneven. As signposted in Section 1.1, these challenges are not simply technical; they are deeply embedded in the structural constraints of a governance system that draws heavily on universalised, Western-centric models of water management. As discussed earlier, IWRM's technocratic orientation and its extractive neoliberal tendencies privilege market logics and technocratic optimisation whiles obscuring the cultural, relational and political dimensions of water governance. Likewise, gender mainstreaming – central to SDG 6 – has become one of the most essentialised measures of governance effectiveness, even though it often rests on simplified assumptions about women's roles, needs and agency.

It is at this juncture that African feminisms and intersectionality provide critical analytical reflections into these gender and water governance simplicities. African feminist epistemologies foreground the contextual, relational, and experiential dimensions of gender that mainstream development framings tend to flatten. They emphasise that gender cannot be understood purely through biological categories or universalised binaries, but must be read through historically grounded worldviews, kinship forms, cosmologies, and the socio-political texture of everyday life. Crucially, African feminisms recognise gender as fluid, performative and embedded – a position consistent with critical feminist scholarship that challenges rigid biological essentialism and interrogates the instability of sex/gender binaries. This view is particularly important for this thesis, as Bamboi's cosmologies assign gendered and personhood identities, roles, and temperaments to rivers and water bodies, including the BVR, whose fluid gender becomes a powerful social,

spiritual, and governance force (developed in Chapters Five and Six). Understanding gender as fluid does not only enrich the conceptual analysis but also aligns with African cosmologies in which both humans and non-humans embody dynamic personhood rather than fixed categories (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013).

In this regard, the metaphysical views on water – water personhood and water-kin relations – theorised by scholars such as Nowak et al., (2024), Cohen et al., (2023), Strang (2023) and Kimmerer (2012) – become instructive in understanding how cosmological water relations unfold in Bamboi. For instance, Strang (2023) demonstrates how the supernatural and metaphysical dimensions of water compel societies to treat water not as a commodity but as a relative, an ancestor, or a moral agent. Such framings foreground reciprocity, ethics, and co-responsibility rather than extraction. Similarly, Cohen et al.’s (2023) “water-kin” and Kimmerer’s (2012) analyses of water as a living and personified being illuminate the relational and non-reductionist logics through which localities steward water resources. These insights resonate strongly with Bamboi’s *water lineage* practices which are rooted in spiritual stewardship led by its Water Priesthood and the custodians of the *Koorafon* – where water is understood through layers of responsibility, ritual, and reciprocal obligation. These cosmological and relational forms of governance – which are discussed further in Chapters Four, Five and Six – exist parallel to, and often in tension with, the formal and technocratic expectations of IWRM, whose universal metrics struggle to account for non-material, spiritual, and relational forms of stewardship.

Intersectionality further deepens this analysis by unbundling how individuals’ experiences of water decision-making are shaped by the convergence of age, kinship, ethnicity, marital status, political affiliation, migration status, spirituality, and economic capacity. In this study, intersectionality is not a buzzword or a “routinised theoretical gesture” (Ahmed, 2013), but a relevant framework to

unpack the experiential and lived process of differently positioned people in everyday water politics. This approach is critical in a setting like Bamboi, where the ability to speak, influence decisions, or mobilise authority around water is shaped less by sex alone and more by one's social embeddedness, relational histories, seniority, and ritual legitimacy. Intersectionality therefore becomes the bridging framework that connects African feminist insights to water governance, enabling a decentring of rigid biological or numerical categories, towards more fluid, situated, and relational understanding.

Applying these lenses to the various water sources in Bamboi – ranging from boreholes and hand-dug wells to surface waters such as the BVR – opens analytical possibilities that dominant governance frameworks fail to anticipate. Therefore, studying water through African feminist and intersectional perspectives allows this thesis to move beyond the oversimplified narrative of “women's inclusion” and instead interrogate the dynamic, relational, and cosmological nature of water governance in Bamboi. These perspectives lay the foundation for examining how power, knowledge, identity, spirituality, and gendered personhood shape the governance of the “many waters” of Bamboi – substantively discussed in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

1.3 Objective and research questions

Building on the foregoing discussion, which illustrates the limitations of dominant water governance frameworks and the analytical possibilities opened through African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism, this thesis is guided by one overarching objective: to interrogate the prospects and possibilities these frameworks offer for decolonising water governance, particularly as it manifests in Bamboi. This objective reflects the need to move beyond universalised assumptions embedded in SDG 6 and IWRM, and to understand how power, identity, cosmology, and intersecting social markers shape the everyday governance of water in ways that

dominant frameworks fail to anticipate. It also responds to the conceptual and empirical gaps identified in the literature – especially the tendency to essentialise gender, overlook fluid subjectivities, depoliticise water decisions, and ignore the relational and spiritual dimensions of water stewardship present in many African contexts.

Guided by these concerns, the thesis asks one central question: what prospects and possibilities do African feminisms, feminist political ecology, and (epistemological) cultural relativism offer for decolonising water governance? To operationalise this main question, four interrelated sub-questions were developed. Each sub-question reflects a specific analytical layer required to unpack the dynamics of the “many waters” of Bamboi – from political ecology (waterscape) to intersectional participation, to customary stewardship, to gendered authority and cosmological worldviews:

1. What are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how do they manifest in Bamboi?

This question explores the national-to-local articulation of water governance, including the tensions between formality and informality, the extractive neoliberal tendencies embedded in IWRM, and the political ecology of water supply and prioritisation.

2. Who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi?

The focus here is on intersectional experiences and everyday institutions – examining how age, sex and gender, kinship, ethnicity, migration, social networks, political affiliation, economic capacity, spiritual legitimacy and personality mediate inclusion and exclusion in water decision-making.

3. How do local and customary institutions interact with formal water governance institutions?

This sub-question draws on institutional bricolage to unpack the assemblage and interaction between state-led governance and customary/spiritual systems of stewardship, including the Koorafon, Water Priesthood, local rituals, and the relational ethics that underpin water safeguarding.

4. How are local and customary institutions gendered?

This question examines how gendered power, fluid gender personhood, and cosmologies – including the gendering of the BVR – shape authority, voice, legitimacy, and participation within Bamboi’s waterscape.

These questions drive a multi-layered analysis of water governance that is attentive to power, cosmology, identity, knowledge production, and the intersecting social processes that mediate everyday inclusion and exclusion. They provide the analytical structure through which the thesis examines how decolonial feminist frameworks enable a richer and context-sensitive understanding of water governance beyond the constraints of universalised policy framings.

1.4 Scope of the study

This study focuses on understanding the localised dynamics of gender and intersectional experiences as they manifest in water governance. The empirical emphasis is northern Ghana, where two interrelated conditions create a compelling context for such an investigation. First, the northern savannah belt experiences comparatively widespread water scarcity (Abanyie et al., 2025; Alhassan et al., 2024), shaping everyday negotiations around access, control and use. Second, the

region is characterised by deeply embedded patrilineal and patriarchal social structures (Gyan and Mfoafo-M'Carthy, 2022), which influence how authority, voice, responsibility and exclusion are distributed among differently positioned people. These dynamics provide a fertile ground for examining how inclusion and exclusion in water decision-making unfold through intersecting identities – beyond the narrow binary of maleness and femaleness – even within a seemingly patriarchal society.

Within this broader regional framing, Bamboi, a vibrant commercial village located in the Bole District of the Savannah Region, was purposefully selected as the ethnographic site. The choice of Bamboi was driven by its intimate and layered connection to the BVR. The BVR is a major component of the Volta River System, which constitutes approximately 70% of Ghana's river network. The system attracts local, national, regional and global interests due to its hydrological, economic and political significance. Situated immediately north of the BVR, Bamboi's social life, economy, cultural practices and cosmological worldviews are all anchored – materially and spiritually – in the river's physical and non-physical forms. This relationship is neither incidental nor peripheral: the BVR serves as a livelihood resource, a site of ritual significance, and a moral-ecological entity whose presence shapes daily practices and governance decisions. These dimensions position Bamboi as a vantage point to explore how global governance frameworks and national water policies – shaped by IWRM, SDG 6 and technocratic logics – interact, collide and coexist with the locally embedded, culturally informed and spiritually grounded practices of water stewardship. Bamboi therefore becomes an analytically rich site for interrogating the possibilities of decolonising water governance through African feminist, FPE and (epistemological) cultural relativism lenses.

1.5 Thesis contributions

This thesis makes five interconnected contributions situated at the intersection of African feminisms, FPE and (epistemological) cultural relativism. They collectively advance a decolonial reading of water governance and gender mainstreaming in Bamboi and the broader Ghanaian waterscape.

First, the thesis offers a historically grounded and politically attuned analysis of Ghana's waterscape by tracing how water governance has transitioned from the authority of autochthonous right-holders – particularly Mo custodians of the BVR such as the Mokooro (Water Priest) and *Koora Hankoora* (Water Priestess) – to the modern Ghanaian state through colonial and postcolonial administrative consolidation. It shows how national infrastructural projects, including the 400 MW Bui Dam powered by the Bui Power Authority, have reconfigured long-standing modes of access and livelihood patterns in Bamboi. This shift has transformed the BVR from a livelihood-sustaining riverine ecosystem into a nationalised hydro-political asset, thereby uprooting pathways of direct appropriation (for example, fishing and domestic water use) and replacing them with “modern” potable water infrastructure such as mechanised boreholes and small-town water systems under Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA) standards. The thesis demonstrates how extractive neoliberal tendencies embedded in IWRM – especially technocratic commodification, pricing logics, and centralised control – are poorly aligned with local realities, amplifying uncertainty and dependency whilst eroding the village's autonomy. The resulting governance landscape situates Bamboi between the spiritual obligations of river stewardship and the unreliable, spatially prioritised delivery of state-led water supply.

Second, the thesis provides a nuanced intersectional analysis of how actors shape, control, and navigate the waterscape in Bamboi. Drawing on African feminist scholarship and FPE, it develops

a deep intra- and inter-categorical intersectional analysis (McCall, 2005) to reveal how categories such as age, gender, lineage/kinship, ethnicity, marital status, migration history, economic capacity, political affiliation, spiritual legitimacy, personality, and social perception intersect to produce patterned inclusion and exclusion in water decision-making. This moves beyond the oversimplified assumption that “women” constitute a homogenous (Misra et al., 2024; Mandel and Semyonov, 2016), uniformly marginalised category and that “men” uniformly wield power. Instead, the thesis shows that authority in Bamboi is relational, situated, and contingent – sometimes privileging older women, spiritually sanctioned women, or kin-embedded men, while simultaneously marginalising some young men, migrants, widows, or socially disconnected individuals. This intersectional focus dismantles the reductive gender binary embedded in dominant gender mainstreaming practices, offering a more textured understanding of the social politics shaping water access and control.

Third, the thesis extends scholarship on institutional bricolage by empirically documenting the co-existence, negotiation, and hybridisation of customary/spiritual and formal/state-led water governance systems in Bamboi. Through the concept of *water bricolage*, it demonstrates how governance emerges through dynamic assemblages of formal institutional arrangements (District Assembly, CWSA, Hydrological Services Department, Bui Power Authority) and long-standing local systems of stewardship (the Koorafon water lineage, water/river priesthood, ritual safeguarding practices, moral-spiritual obligations). Whilst the formal IWRM framework assumes coherent, integrated institutional structures, the thesis shows that water governance in Bamboi is inherently informal, spiritually governed, and relational – operating largely outside the formalised spaces envisioned by SDG 6.5.1 monitoring mechanisms. The research therefore contributes a detailed ethnography of multi-layered water governance in rural northern Ghana, revealing that

localised, cosmologically informed modes of stewardship remain deeply valued, widely practiced, and materially consequential despite their silence in national policy frameworks.

Fourth, the thesis advances decolonial feminist scholarship by integrating African feminisms, intersectionality, FPE, and cultural relativism to examine gendered and fluid water governance in a Ghanaian context. The ethnographic finding that the BVR itself is understood as possessing a fluid gendered personality – shifting identities, temperaments and social roles – is an original contribution that unsettles rigid Western sex/gender binaries and reveal that gender is socially produced, situated, and shifting rather than biologically fixed. The cosmological gendering of the BVR as *Nnaa Moo* resonates with Strang’s (2023) theorisation of water as a moral, relational, and metaphysical being; Cohen et al.’s (2023) notion of water-kin; and Kimmerer’s (2012) framing of water as living and personified. Through these insights, the thesis shows that Bamboi’s water governance is anchored not only in technical management but also in spiritual reciprocity, ritual accountability, and relational ethics – dimensions that dominant governance frameworks such as IWRM neither anticipate nor accommodate. Further, the thesis brings African feminist epistemologies into direct conversation with water governance scholarship, this thesis makes an original contribution by demonstrating that even within patriarchal settings, women possess diverse forms of authority – spiritual, moral, economic and relational – and that gender mainstreaming must be contextually situated rather than universalised.

Finally, this study is among the few that bring the decoloniality discourse into water governance in sub-Saharan Africa. I unveil how the local and customary institutions that govern water are gendered and mimic the gendered dynamics of the local social structure of Bamboi. I do so by drawing from African feminisms and FPE scholarship. One of the original contributions of this study is bringing African feminisms scholarship into the water governance space. African

feminisms as a decolonial scholarship criticises the simplification associated with Westernised feminisms relating to its embedded view of women from a universal point, especially when it relates to gender mainstreaming (for example, Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 1997; Amadiume, 1987). Relatedly, the FPE scholarship rather merges decoloniality, localised worldviews, and intersectionalities in (natural) water resource governance. Specifically, I bring the empirical scholarship on FPE and water governance to the rural northern Ghanaian context. Hitherto, an expansive scholarship on FPE and water governance are geographically situated in urban and rural Asia with significant contributions from scholars such as Farhana Sultana (see Sultana 2021; 2020; 2009), Yaffa Truelove (see Truelove, 2019; 2011), and Padini Nirmal (see Nirmal, 2017). These studies illustrate the situated exclusion and inclusion within the various levels of water governance through the dynamic interplay of intersectional factors (which act as axes of power) and categorisation in urban and rural Asia. In sub-Saharan Africa, a few studies by Ellis Adjei Adams have explored FPE and water governance in urban Malawi (see Adams, 2024; Adams et al., 2018). Except for Nirmal (2017) who provides empirical evidence on decoloniality in her research in Kerala, the rest mainly focus on intersectionalities (especially as it is shaped by gendered experiences) and are least focussed on empirical evidence of decoloniality; a concept that has gained contemporary attention in FPE scholarship (for example, Harcourt et al., 2023; Mollett et al., 2020; Rocheleau, 2015).

Drawing these two concepts together, African feminisms and FPE, I unravel that even within a small patriarchal geographical setting such as Bamboi, women are not the same. This is because they are differently positioned based on their intersectional characteristics such as kinship, age, and other socio-economic statuses. This implies that gender mainstreaming cannot be fashioned in a universal manner; a position African feminisms have long advanced. Furthermore, whilst the

dominant narrative on gender in patriarchal settings portrays women as timid, weak and disempowered, adult females in Bamboi exhibit different levels of assertiveness, strength and adjudicatory prowess. These features are organically engaged by females who share similar kin/family, economic or similar interests to organise the village when there is a need. For instance, I discuss the Women's Committee (WoC) of Bamboi, which was organically formed by a group of Mo women to offer adjudicatory functions to the village. Although the group is defunct as all its pioneer members are deceased, it draws attention to the deeply embedded evidence that it is simplistic to assume that all women (especially those in patriarchal/patrilineal settings) are unassertive and require some form of quota to represent in formal spaces such as water committees.

1.6 Organisation of the study

To address the research questions, this thesis engages decolonial frameworks, including African feminisms, (epistemological) cultural relativism, and FPE, to illuminate how knowledge, power, and worldview shape water governance. Chapter Two, "Towards an African feminist political ecology of water governance", reviews these conceptual terrains. It synthesises scholarship on gender and feminism, waterscapes, intersectionality, and governance arrangements, making a novel contribution by explicitly bridging African feminist thought with water governance literatures and emphasising the situatedness of governance practices within local epistemologies and everyday life.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological framing of the study through a decolonial feminist ethnography. It details the research design, fieldwork processes, positionality, and ethical dilemmas encountered in Bamboi, situating my ten-month immersion and the relational dynamics that underpinned data production.

The first analytical chapter, Chapter Four, “The nature of the waterscape of the Black Volta River – ‘Nnaa Moo’ and the framing of Bamboi”, responds to the first research question, “*what are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how do they manifest in Bamboi?*” by analysing how national water-political dynamics manifest in Bamboi. It contextualises the village within Ghana’s broader waterscape, examining how hydro-social relations, worldviews, and state interventions, especially the Bui Dam, reconfigure access, use, control, and predictability of water resources. The chapter illustrates how the BVR underpins Bamboi’s socio-cultural identity, economy, and environmental rhythms.

Chapter Five, “Everyday water institutions and the intersectional experiences in the multiple waterscapes of Bamboi” answers the second research question: *who shapes and controls the waterscape?* Drawing on intersectionality, it reveals how everyday institutions generate patterned inclusion and exclusion. It illuminates the complex interplay of age, sex, kinship, ethnicity, marital status, religion, economic status, and other positionalities that structure who participates, who is silenced, and how authority circulates, filling a major gap left by dominant development frameworks and gender-mainstreaming approaches.

Chapter Six, “Localised worldviews and layers of natural (water) resource stewardship” addresses the third research question on the interactions between local/customary institutions and formal governance systems. Engaging (epistemological) cultural relativism and institutional (water) bricolage, the chapter examines how Bamboi’s cosmological and customary stewardship practices, embodied by the *Koorafon* (Water/River family gate) and Water Priesthood, co-exist, complement, and sometimes challenge state-led regimes. It elaborates the metaphysical and material practices that shape sanctification, safeguarding, and resource perception, revealing exclusionary and inclusionary boundaries rooted in kinship rather than biological sex categories.

Chapter Seven, “Gendered cosmologies, power and water governance: An (African) feminist political ecology of Bamboi”, the final analytical chapter, responds to the fourth research question on the gendered nature of local institutions. Situated within FPE and African feminisms is the use of storytelling, lived experiences, and historical narratives to show how gendered power, voice, and authority are negotiated in practice. The Chapter foregrounds how Bamboi’s women exercise agency, organise collectively, and challenge universalised Western gender imaginaries through local, spiritual, and relational modes of governance.

Finally, Chapter Eight, “Conclusions of the study” synthesises the findings across all four research questions, grounding them in the integrated frameworks of African feminisms, cultural relativism, and FPE. It highlights the thesis’ key contributions and argues for a rethinking of gender mainstreaming in water governance beyond Western epistemic frames, urging context-sensitive, decolonial, and intersectional approaches.

Having established the research context, problematisation of gender mainstreaming, and the rationale for a decolonial feminist interrogation of water governance, the next chapter turns to the conceptual and theoretical foundations of the study. Chapter Two synthesises African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism to develop the analytical lens through which the waterscape of Bamboi is examined.

CHAPTER TWO

2 Towards an African feminist political ecology of water governance

2.0 Introduction

This chapter unpacks concepts of decoloniality, intersectionality, African feminism and feminist political ecology to challenge dominant forms of knowing and practices regarding gender and water decision-making at different levels of governance, spanning global, regional, national and local settings. This challenges the overly simplistic and Western-centric approaches to discourses on development, gender, and water resource governance. To do this, the chapter is structured as follows.

Firstly, it interrogates the dominant assumptions and gaps in the literature around gender and water governance. This unpacks the lapses in the GAD literature on water governance and brings to the fore the deep-rooted Eurocentrism embedded in mainstream water governance frameworks drawing attention that decoloniality offers an innovative lens through which decision-making in water, particular aspects that relates to participation can be deeply explored beyond the simplistic emphasis on sex, as the cause and consequence of exclusion or inclusion in water governance in Africa.

The second section lays a foundation on the literature of African feminisms, which include Womanism and Africana Womanism (Hudson-Weems, 1993; Ogunyemi, 1985; Walker, 1979), Intersectionality (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1989), Stiwanism – social transformation including women in Africa (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994), Motherism (Acholonu, 1995), Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004) and Snail-sense Feminism (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012). This literature offers an alternative and “locally rooted” feminist perspective to Western-shaped gender and Eurocentric paradigms, which are increasingly critiqued for invisibilising the complexity of how African gender

experiences is shaped and performed. These African-grounded intellectual discourses on gender and feminism form the central theoretical underpinnings of this thesis. In addition to these theorised frameworks, a wider body of African feminist scholarship, particularly *Decolonisation and Afro-feminism* (Tamale, 2020), *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Oyewumi, 1997), and *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (Amadiume, 1987), offers critical interventions for rethinking how gender is constructed, performed, and understood in African contexts. These framings cumulatively provide the analytical positioning for interrogating gendered relations within African societies (such as Bamboi) and thus significantly inform the interpretive lens adopted throughout this thesis.

Whilst interrogating the many concepts that frame African feminisms may be quite winding, this study has carefully engaged these concepts (rather than just “intersectionality”, which is significant to this thesis). This expanded engagement is a deliberate epistemic action to avoid *epistemic habits*. Aldrin-Salskov (2020) has argued that epistemic habits are connected to the discursive engagements, theoretical arguments and concepts that are regularly and habitually sourced loosely to become buzzy. As signposted earlier, Ahmed (2013) rather conceptualises these dynamics as routinised theoretical gestures, which constitute the habitual and often uncritical deployment of certain popular theoretical vocabularies that come to signify whether a piece of scholarship is regarded as intellectually legitimate or sufficiently ‘critical’. Such gestures reflect the workings of *knowledge geographies*, the uneven intellectual terrains that determine which epistemologies are centred, which are marginalised, and which are rendered invisible. These geographies manifest, for example, in the dominance of Western feminisms over non-Western feminist theories such as African feminist epistemologies; in the privileging of technocratic frameworks such as IWRM over localised water ontologies which are shaped by people’s culture; and in the way Global North

citation cultures disproportionately shape what counts as ‘rigorous’ scholarship (Ndofirepi and Ndofirepi, 2020).

Within these broader geographies of knowledge, *epistemic whiteness* emerges as a structuring logic (Aldrin-Salskov, 2020), shaping which forms of knowledge are censored and whose worldviews are afforded universal authority. This lens is particularly relevant to criticising the intersectional framing of this study, as it illuminates the inherent limitations that applying intersectional approaches themselves risk becoming the very epistemic hierarchies they seek to unsettle. Over time, the buzzing of such ideas defeats the real engagement they were intended to convey. These habits can be double-barrelled; whilst they may exclude other ways of thinking over time, they can potentially spark fruitful discourse (Aldrin-Salskov, 2020). Intersectionality risks falling into the trap of epistemic habit or routinised theoretical gestures due to its popularity in feminist research (Aldrin-Salskov, 2020; Ahmed, 2013). Hence, I avoid this habit by unpacking the several concepts and arguments rooted in African feminisms rather than only dwelling on intersectionality to invisibilise the several frameworks that embody African feminisms.

The third section engages water governance by unpacking the argument along the simplistic practice of GAD in water decision-making. It then advances intersectionality (as rooted in African feminisms and FPE) to frame a wider decolonial feminist political ecology, which highlights the complex intersectional dynamics of actors and institutions in natural (water) resources governance. Furthermore, it identifies tensions between Western-shaped feminist theory and (epistemological) cultural relativism regarding the possibility of universal trajectories or modes of natural resource governance.

2.1 Synthetising the conceptual relationship among the key concepts

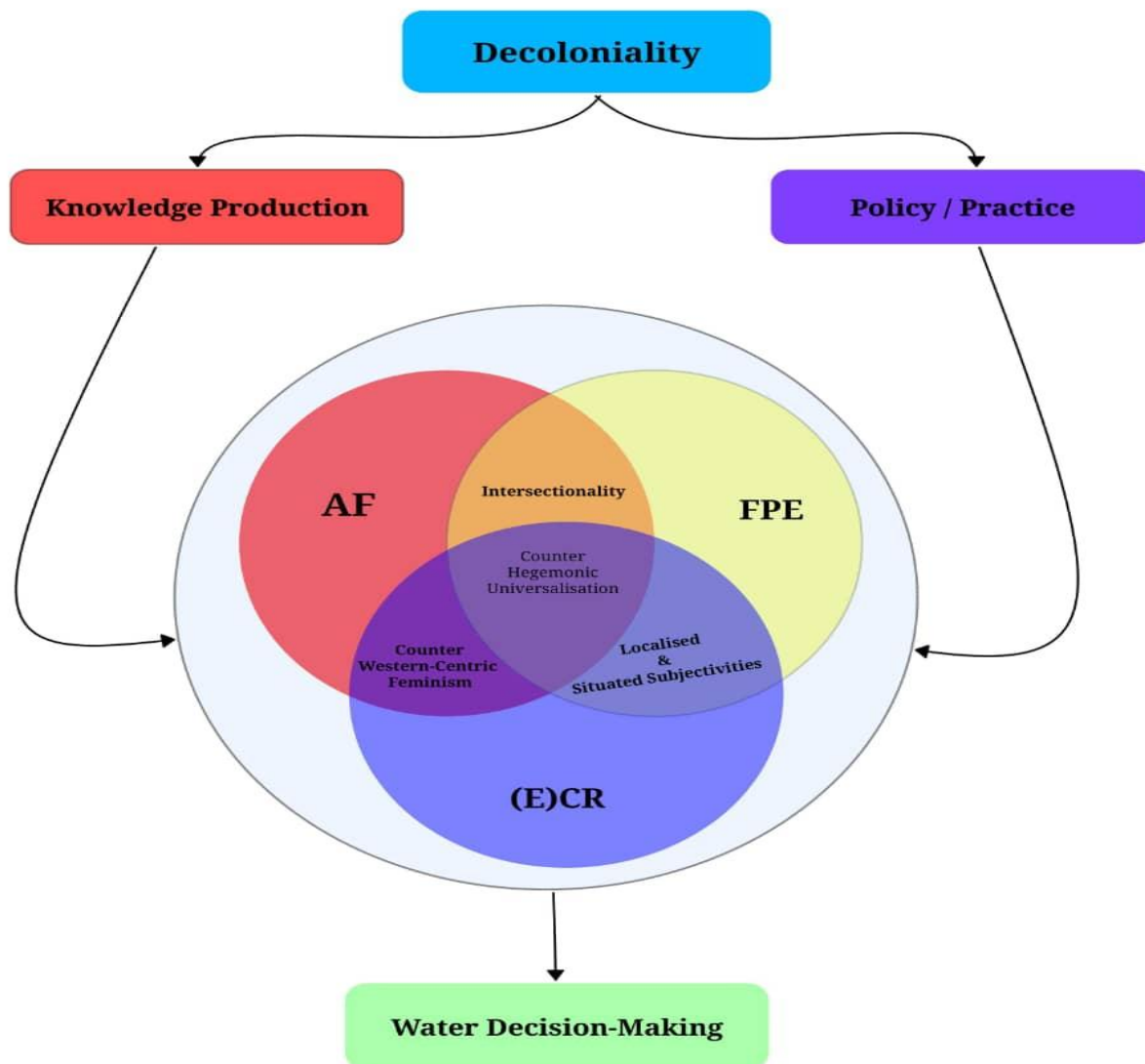


Figure 1: Conceptual relationships among key variables; AF, FPE and (E)CR

Source: Author's construct.

The conceptual foundation of this thesis – represented in Figure 1 – rests upon the theoretical dialogue among African feminisms, FPE and (epistemological) cultural relativism, brought together as a decolonial analytical triangle through which gender and water governance may be more fully understood. This synthesis is necessary because dominant theorisation on gender and

natural resource governance – particularly in development and water policy – remains shaped by Eurocentric epistemic norms that universalise Western experiences and marginalise other ways of knowing (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023; Aldrin-Salskov, 2020). In mainstream gender-and-development discourse, such epistemic hierarchies have produced what Mignolo and Walsh (2018) term the colonial matrix of power, where Western frameworks continue to define the terms through which gender, participation, and governance are interpreted in global policy.

In response, African feminisms offer a critical site of resistance by foregrounding the contextual, plural, and historically grounded experiences of African women (and men). Scholars such as Oyewumi (2003; 1997), Nnaemeka (2015; 2004; 1998), Steady (2005; 1987; 1985), Mama (2019; 1995) and Tamale (2020) critique Western feminist universalism for its inattention to the cosmologies, kinship systems, lineage structures, and social hierarchies that organise African societies. These perspectives insist that gender is neither singular nor stable but relational and mediated by intersecting markers such as age, seniority, spirituality, ethnicity, marital positioning, and political embeddedness (Mirza, 2014; McCall, 2005; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1986). Intersectionality, when treated reflexively rather than as a routinised theoretical gesture (Ahmed, 2013), becomes a crucial bridge between African feminist epistemologies and the lived realities of water governance examined in this thesis.

Parallel to this, FPE expands the scope of political ecology by interrogating how environmental access, control, and knowledge production are shaped by gendered and intersectional power relations (Rocheleau et al., 1996; Elmhirst, 2011; Sultana, 2009, 2021; Harcourt, 2019, 2023). FPE resists the technocratic flattening of resource governance –epitomised in IWRM and SDG 6 – by emphasising everyday experiences, embodiment, emotion, care, and the relationalities that structure how people engage with natural resources. These insights are especially salient in

contexts such as Bamboi, where water is not simply a material good but a sentient, cosmologically anchored entity with moral and social expectations. Thus, FPE's attention to power and positionality aligns with African feminist insistence on grounded, relational understandings of gender, while extending these debates into the domain of natural resource governance.

The third conceptual pillar, (epistemological) cultural relativism, compels a methodological commitment to situating knowledge within the socio-cultural, religious, linguistic, and cosmological contexts that shape local meaning systems (Datta, 2018; Lugones, 2010). In water governance, cultural relativism challenges the presumption that Western-defined notions of participation, efficiency, and equity can be seamlessly transplanted into non-Western landscapes. Instead, it highlights the legitimacy of cosmological stewardship, ritual authority, and autochthonous institutions – such as the Water Priesthood and Koorafon, which I discuss in Chapters Four to Seven – in regulating water decisions. These relational forms of governance are frequently dismissed as “informal” or “traditional” within global policy frameworks, but cultural relativism allows them to emerge as epistemologically valid and politically consequential.

These frameworks collectively unbundle the epistemic limitations inherent in universalised gender mainstreaming and global water governance frameworks. They expose how IWRM's technocratic orientation and SDG 6's representational metrics fail to capture the intersectional, spiritual and socio-historical dynamics that shape authority, legitimacy, and participation in places like Bamboi. By combining African feminisms, FPE and cultural relativism, the thesis advances a decolonial critique – one that not only challenges the dominance of Western-centric knowledge production but also proposes more grounded pathways for understanding how gender, power, cosmology, and identity co-produce the waterscape.

This conceptual synthesis therefore sets the stage for the rest of the chapter: African feminisms interrogate the universalisation of gender; FPE foregrounds the everyday, embodied, and political dimensions of water governance; and (epistemological) cultural relativism legitimises localised epistemologies, ontologies, and moral orders. These frameworks create the epistemic conditions for re-imagining water governance beyond the constraints of universalist development models, allowing this thesis to interrogate the fragmented, negotiated, and cosmologically embedded nature of the “many waters” of Bamboi with conceptual precision and decolonial sensitivity.

2.2 Situating gender within the water governance discourse

It has been argued that decisions relating to water are critical and require the engagement of the numerous water stakeholders, which span duty-bearers, service delivery systems and water users, to satisfy the fundamentals of the 2015 Water Governance Facility (WGF) (Camkin and Neto, 2016). The 2015 WGF embodies four basic premises for water decision-making, which are made up of the social, economic, political, and environmental dimensions of water access and control. Similarly, the 2015 WWAP indicated that water flows through three pillars: economic, social, and political conduits (Connor, 2015). The social and political dimensions of these frameworks for water decision-making require that numerous water stakeholders are engaged in water decision-making (Camkin and Neto, 2016). Situated within this framing, there have been various arguments that there should be deliberate involvement of females in water decision-making (Fauconnier et al., 2018; Harris, 2009), as the current scholarship on gender and water governance significantly agree that they are minimally engaged regardless of their roles in water retrieval and collection for various uses in different settings (Hillesland and Doss, 2024). For instance, in many countries including Ghana, women bear the primary responsibility for securing water for domestic use, a role that places them at the centre of everyday water practices and household water security

(Dapaah and Harris, 2017; Crow and Sultana, 2002). Because women undertake most of the water-fetching labour, policy frameworks and development discourse, particularly those inspired by SDG 6 (and IWRM), frequently advocate for their inclusion in water governance spaces. These spaces are usually formally constituted such as Water Committees. Feminist scholars, however, caution that such advocacy often reinforces the gendered division of labour by legitimising women's unpaid domestic work, rather than transforming the structural inequalities that produce and sustain the gender roles on water (Sultana, 2011; Truelove, 2011).

At the same time, critical water governance scholars argue that grounding women's participation solely in their domestic water responsibilities risks reducing participation to a matter of representation justice rather than substantive influence. Such representational approach flattens the relationality that underpins gender and brings the lapses of WID and Women and Development (WAD) that theoretically and practically centred on women's inclusion rather than gendered relations, back into practice (see Rathgeber, 2003). This is because such perspective suggests that the mere presence of women on water committees or governance platforms "ticks the box" for gender equity without shifting decision-making power or addressing the deeper political and power dynamics that shape access, authority, and voice (Ahlers and Zwarteveen 2009; Harris, 2009). Within such arrangements, women may be physically present in governance structures (mainly committees) yet remain excluded from agenda-setting, deliberation, or leadership roles, illustrating what Cornwall (2008) describes as *invited spaces* that do not necessarily enable meaningful participation. Cleaver and Hamada (2010) doubt the workability of such committees in taking substantive water decisions all together.

Furthermore, FPE scholarship emphasises that gendered inequalities in water governance are embedded not only in material tasks but also in cultural norms, intersecting identities, and power

relations that mediate whose knowledge counts, who speaks, and who is heard (Sultana, 2021; Elmhirst, 2011). Thus, participation premised on women's domestic roles alone risks obscuring the broader intersectional constraints, such as age, marital status, lineage, or socio-spiritual authority, that limit their agency, and particularly important in most settings.

The foregoing critiques illuminate why calls for women's inclusion in water governance must go beyond numeric representation. Meaningful participation requires recognising women not merely as domestic water providers but as actors whose knowledge, lived experiences, and intersectional identities shape water governance practices in complex and diverse ways. The nature of gender mainstreaming in present-day water governance shaped by the targets of the SDGs (and IWRM) problematically shifts attention from the deep-rooted politics and simplicity related to the uniqueness and diversity of females that make up everyday lives in local settings.

Table 1: Global-Ghana policy frameworks and positions on gender and IWRM

Source / Institution	Position on gender and IWRM	Implementation challenges identified	Authors
Global Water Partnership (GWP)	Gender mainstreaming is essential to achieving SDG 6.5 on IWRM, linked closely with SDG 5. UNEP monitors SDG 6.5.1; global progress shows improvements but persistent gaps.	Persistent implementation gaps despite policy commitments. Weak integration of gender indicators in national IWRM systems. Limited capacity in many countries to collect sex-disaggregated data.	GWP (2021).
UN Women, UNEP and Global Water Partnership: Joint Policy Brief (2025)	Calls for gender integration across water governance; highlights under-representation of women, lack of sex-disaggregated and intersectional data, and identifies seven pathways for strengthening implementation.	Under-representation of women in decision-making. Weak data systems for monitoring progress. Institutional resistance to shifting entrenched governance norms.	UN Women et al. (2025).

UNEP-DHI, Cap-Net UNDP, Gender and Water Alliance: Training Course (2024–25)	Provides global training aligned with “ <i>why gender matters in IWRM</i> ”. The training focuses on moving from “theory-to-practice”.	Capacity building not evenly distributed across regions. Translation of training into actual policy adoption remains limited. (2025). Gaps between technical training and on-the-ground realities.
UN-Water / IWRM Action Hub	Provides technical guidance, tools, and communities of practice for implementing gender-responsive IWRM at the global level.	Countries adopt tools unevenly. Limited national-level institutionalisation of “best” practices. UN-Water (2024). Persistent gap between global frameworks and local realities.
UNEP: SDG 6.5.1 Global IWRM Monitoring Reports	Tracks global implementation of IWRM (indicator 6.5.1) and informs national gender mainstreaming efforts.	Slow progress on achieving target 6.5.1. National reporting systems vary widely in quality. Gender components still weakly embedded in most IWRM monitoring frameworks. UNEP (2024).

Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection (MoGCSP): National Gender Policy 2025–2034 (Ghana)	Provides Ghana’s current official framework for gender mainstreaming across all sectors, including water; emphasises justice, equity, data systems, and participation.	Policy-to-practice gap remains significant. Local institutions lack resources to implement guidelines. Weak coordination between national policy and district-level water governance.	UN in Ghana (2026).
MoGCSP: National Gender Policy (2015)	Establishes foundational commitments for gender mainstreaming used by ministries and agencies including water institutions.	Outdated elements relative to current SDG and IWRM needs. Persistent institutional bottlenecks in MoGCSP (2015). mainstreaming gender across ministries. Weak enforcement mechanisms.	
Ministry of Health: National Health Sector Gender Policy (2024)	Aligns with MoGCSP policy; stresses cross-sectoral collaboration, constitutional obligations, and gender responsiveness in service delivery.	Inter-ministerial coordination challenges. Health–water linkages insufficiently articulated in practice. Limited gender budgeting at operational level.	MoH (2024).

		Gender provisions here are often symbolic rather	
		than operational, such performative governance	
	Sector policies guide water governance;	has limited effects on gender mainstreaming and	
MWHWR:	Water	gender integration remains uneven. brings WID simplicities back to water	Ministry of Finance
sector and related	CGIAR analyses show how ministries	governance.	(2025); MWHWR
analyses	interpret gender obligations within	Fragmented institutional responsibilities across	(2025); Lasiter and
	IWRM frameworks.	water agencies.	Stawicki (2014).
		Limited budget allocations for gender	
		mainstreaming.	
Source: Author's construct.			

As synthesised in Table 1, whilst global agencies articulate strong commitments to gender in IWRM, the adaptation gaps remain pervasive due to the unalignment with the unique socio-cultural contexts that shape the world. Relatedly, Evaristo et al. (2023) and Biswas (2008) raise questions about the workability of the IWRM due to the complex and unique traditions of various geographies of the world that challenge a uniform traction of solution. Benson et al. (2020) argue that the top-down and technocratic approach of the IWRM often riddle its practical application in developing countries due to diversity in cultural, economic and political contexts. Such technocratic and engineering fixtures are towards managing natural causes of water scarcity such as climate change, drought and flooding with limited interest in normalised political, cultural, and economic processes that create uneven access to water (Truelove, 2019). Section 2.4 develops these critiques further by examining how technocratic IWRM assumptions collide with Ghana's plural water governance institutions.

Evolving evidence on intersectional-shaped research (see Ifejika Speranza and Bikketi, 2017) also criticises the stereotyping of the present nature of gender mainstreaming in water governance research and practice as it treats females (especially women) as a homogenous group. This assumption is false, even among equally racialised females such as Black women. This difference presents complex and multiple positionalities that challenge the very justification of representational justice and equity on which gender mainstreaming is situated. Moreover, whilst the inter-sex representation between males and females in decision-making in general (and that of water) may indicate a deficit of female representation, it is neither the case that all males possess similar representational capacity to engage in water decisions. Thus, regardless of the wider female to male representation deficits in decision-making being wider, some females may possess the masculine ability to engage in decision-making in a way that a group of males may

not possess. These dynamics rest on the deep-rooted intersectional interplay that binds societies in which people are unequally positioned along economic, social, and cultural lines, not just gender and sexual lines (Ifejika Speranza and Bikketi, 2017). Africa has predominantly featured in this conversation (see Naiga et al., 2024; Olagunju et al., 2019; Adams et al., 2018; Sanusi, 2018; Ifejika Speranza and Bikketi, 2017; Dikito-Wachtmeister, 2000). The subsequent text unbundles the various angles of water governance.

Water governance involves the whole continuum of influences and decisions on water management (Pahl-Wostl, 2019; World Water Assessment Programme, 2006). This continuum captures global, national, sub-national and local level institutions and structures geared toward ensuring that water is sustained for agricultural, domestic and industrial purposes. It is within the continuum of influence that gender mainstreaming is located. Whilst other aspects of water governance do not end with gender, it is predominantly essentialised to depict that the absence of “balanced” gender representation in water governance results in water problems. This reasoning carries the potential to blur the strong and ongoing political decisions by governments that have a grip on water issues. In reality, gender mainstreaming and balanced access to water are not mutually inclusive nor directly proportional to each other. This is because having a focus on gender representation in committees will ordinarily not fix the financial, technical, technocratic and managerial lapses that create and sustain water problems.

According to Nang et al. (2011), the processes of water governance should involve the systematic participation of a wide spectrum of public, private and community-based stakeholders in the planning, operation and management of water resources and sources. Adjakloe (2021) argues that water governance at the local and lower levels is the coordination of actions, a network of stakeholders, various sectors of society, and power relations for development, thereby shifting

focus from centrally administered and service-oriented management of water to a user-based and resource-centred management system. Whereas the above descriptions of water governance bring stakeholders' participation into perspective, Gender and Water Alliance-GWA (2006) indicate that "good" water governance drives on the principles of equity, gender sensitivity, efficiency, socio-economic and environmental sensitivity to arrive at sustainable use and equitable sharing of water resources to meet the needs and interests of diverse groups of men and women.

Over the years, gender-sensitivity criteria in water governance have largely been reduced to the presence or absence of women in decision-making spaces, most commonly in formally organised mechanisms such as local water committees (Cleaver and Hamada, 2010). This approach, as discussed in Section 2.5.1, inadvertently recycles WID logics by equating gender with women's representation and assuming that adding women into existing structures will correct inequities. From a GAD perspective, however, such framing is fundamentally limited because it treats gender as an individual attribute rather than a relational system of power embedded in institutions, norms and political priorities. Consequently, focusing on women's numerical presence overlooks the deeper structural and institutional dynamics (Kolipaka et al., 2026), including political prioritisation, resource allocation practices and bureaucratic inefficiencies that shape water access and governance outcomes. In doing so, it whitewashes the multidimensional barriers that constrain both women's and men's participation and masks the fact that meaningful and equitable water governance involve more than meeting representational targets; it requires transforming the institutional processes through which decisions are made, authority is exercised, and interests are negotiated.

Water and its governance prominently feature in dominant development and water frameworks such as the SDGs and IWRM (Truelove, 2019) due to water's impact on livelihoods, socio-

economic and overall wellbeing of the human population (Qadir et al., 2022). However, Mdee et al. (2024) and Loftus (2015) have argued that regardless of the ‘hopefulness’ of technocratic frameworks such as the SDGs in forecasting water accessibility to people for its uses, such frameworks often underestimate power and politics in how water is accessed and controlled by different social groups within a geographical area. This is because such frameworks often assume water scarcity as the product of natural factors such as drought, climate change, groundwater depletion and declining water tables (Truelove, 2019).

However, the play of power in water governance carries the potential to define water distribution and access which can cause ‘unnatural’ water scarcity and compromise water availability, beyond natural factors (Loftus, 2015). For instance, Ahlers (2010) draws attention to how control of water decision-making can result in “resource capture” and create unequal patterns of access to water. Resource capture is a political control of resources shaped by the influence of power to create uneven access and benefits. Whilst there is significant consensus that uneven access to water has gendered implications and significantly impacts females in places where water access for individuals and household uses requires some form of transportation, it has different impacts on different people beyond gender and sexual categories. For instance, in middle-class homes with domestic workers (whether males or females), bear the implications of water availability. However, those domestic workers may not have the leverage and opportunity to engage in water decisions, assuming participation is meant to achieve justice.

Ongoing research, for example Abubakari (2025), Kwoyiga (2024) Hannah et al. (2021) and Asaba (2015), portray that females (women and girls) are still at the fore of domestic water availability. As well, it is often assumed that women in Africa, especially those in rural parts are mostly responsible for growing, storing, processing, and preparing food, handling livestock,

gathering food, fodder, and fuel wood, managing the domestic water supply, and providing most of the labour for post-harvest activities (Mbow et al. 2019). The foremost responsibilities of most rural women in Africa, and even urban and peri-urban areas, have stronger connections with the availability of water and the decisions regarding use, access to, and control of water. As such, it is argued that the presence and participation of women, who are most affected by water decisions are important in water governance because they possess important information, knowledge and skills regarding the availability, quality, reliability, and purity of water sources across the contexts of household and communal levels (Fauconnier et al., 2018; Green and Baden, 1994; Leach, 1992), to enhance livelihood options that are connected to water.

Furthermore, women's participation in water governance has been widely advocated by a wide range of actors for a variety of reasons. They include the following; making women subjects of water governance (Glazebrook and Opoku, 2020), integrating women's needs and knowledge (Fauconnier et al., 2018; Boateng et al., 2013; ICWE, 1992), enhancing women's status (Emenike et al., 2017), improved water management (Chachage et al., 1990), accelerate efforts to achieving the SDGs (UN, 2015) and increasing women's voice in governance in general (Harris, 2009). Regardless, women continue to be excluded from water governance mechanisms across the world (Hussain, 2007). The foregone arguments make gendering of participation in water discourse important, as females (women and girls) presently assume the domestic responsibilities of water availability. Although the call against exclusion is justified by the principles of equity in decision-making, it closes the realities of the many causes of water problems such as political operations of a local setting by over dwelling on gender balance as the solution to water problems.

Whilst Benson et al. (2020) argue that the concept of 'participation' is often vaguely defined and misused in the management of water, the nature of participation in water governance, especially

that of gender mainstreaming mainly dwells on representational participation. Meanwhile, gender mainstreaming is one of the very essentialised and misplaced concepts in water decision-making. Relatedly, Cleaver and Toner (2006) have argued that representational participation does not necessarily meet the needs of the poor and marginalised. This is because the emphasis on representation mainly focuses on women and their presence in formal governance spaces such as water committees (Cleaver and Hamada, 2010). This becomes a priority by national and local implementation bodies due to meeting percentages for external funding and credit for ‘good’ governance practices at certain times and in some contexts (Opare, 2005).

In essence, an evolving set of studies has established that such committees do not resolve the deep-rooted politics that are associated with the assemblage of decisions on water availability and access. Consequently, real-time politics and power that influence participation and decisions on water are taken for granted (Adams et al., 2018). Meanwhile, Blomquist and Schlager (2005) indicate that as soon as choices are present, the role of politics is present. Hence, the politics of representation and the dynamics of power surrounding representation require deeper interrogation towards being shaped along the multiple complexities that relate to water decisions in practice and research. This is because power and politics are everywhere and sometimes manifested through less visible norms that may not be seen in explicit laws, rules, hierarchies (Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017), and structures. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the fibres of politics and power in water decisions in terms of representation, ideas and benefits, else water governance risks excluding the very people affected by water decisions – the needy and marginalised, including some women and some groups of men.

Framing water decisions along the complexity of the politics of representation requires carefully engaging the intersectional perspectives that shape discussions on actors' unique positions. This

is because without recognition of contextual and socio-cultural intersections, one may assume that the dominance of men in water decision-making spaces indicate that every man can assume decision spaces to influence decision or that the proportional presence of women in decision making mechanism is enough to enhance water decisions and shape water decisions to increase the efforts to solving water issues. However, Adam et al. (2018), Sultana (2011) and Mdee (2008) found that in Malawi, India and Tanzania, respectively, preconditions and intersections including age, ethnicity, economic status, caste, religion, gender and sex can interplay with social networks, and socio-cultural practices to create and reinforce spaces of marginalization, tokenism and exclusion in decision making.

The contention is that the agenda setting and interests on gender and water governance have centred on the representation of women in water decision-making – often a reflection of ‘mainstream’ water governance and development frameworks. Rarely does it capture the politics of ‘who gets represented’ and ‘how the voice and ideas of the represented informs decisions on use, access to, and control of water and whether such presence discount the multiple and complex water problems, which include finance, political prioritisation and natural causes. For instance, authors including Clement (2012) argue that there has been extensive research on women and water with the central focus on elements such as the gender division of tasks and labour, right to access water and the decision-making processes with regards to women’s involvement in water management organisations, committees and institutions-formal and informal. On the contrary, Harcourt (2019), Truelove (2019), and Fauconnier et al. (2018) have argued that even though research and practice on gender have focused on women’s presence in formal water governance strategies, they have been insufficient about the politics associated with representation and the nature of the participation in the governance of water, especially as it concerns gender.

Politics and power play are often ignored in the representation of women and marginalised persons in decisions regarding water distribution, access and control in instances where local level authority can define such. Consequently, Osumanu et al. (2014) and Zwarteveen and Boelens (2017) suggest that policy on water governance should focus on deeply entrenched political, cultural, and economic processes that underlie and determine unequal access to water for different people. For instance, although Zwarteveen and Boelens (2017) argue that participation of water users relates to representational justice (political involvement in control and decision-making regarding sharing in water decisions at local management levels and at broader scales of water governance such as national and sub-national levels), Truelove (2019) and Mehta (2014) indicate that it is appropriate that patterns, including sex, class, ethnicity and several differentiations and inequalities, are questioned in the participation spectrum of water governance. Furthermore, Mdee (2008) uses an ethnographic study in Uchira, Tanzania to highlight how age, gender and wealth interplay with social networks, kinship and cultural norms to define individual agency and motivations to participate in collective actions, including water decisions in Uchira. These dynamics throw light on the politics and power that these patterns create to influence water decisions and the benefits that accrue thereof.

Based on the foregone arguments, gender mainstreaming in water governance requires much more contextual interrogation, shaped by decoloniality and criticality, than the current representation-driven nature of it. This shaping requires engaging FPE arguments on water governance, which is very critical in efforts towards decolonising the gender mainstreaming and social participation in management decision-making processes and the outcomes. This is because analysing the current dynamics of social participation, especially as it relates to gender and the emphasis on women in water governance often relies on Western assumptions of gender – which

rarely go beyond just the representation of women to capture intersectional issues including age, economic and educational status, religion, ethnicity, culture and class that often affect both the presence and the voice of particular women in decision-making processes regarding resource governance.

Consequently, frameworks shaped by such assumptions have been widely criticised for their skewness and over dwelling on females. Hence, this study resonates with the few but evolving studies including Hillesland and Doss (2024), Sultana (2021), Harcourt (2019), Truelove (2019) and Fauconnier et al. (2018), that explore gender and water governance by engaging the complex and intersecting dynamics of water stakeholders, their interests, the politics of use, access and control over the appropriation of water resources and benefits, and how prevailing access mechanisms on water include or exclude particular groups.

2.3 Framing waterscape and institutional bricolage in the water governance (of Ghana)

There is consensus in scholarship that the numerous benefits accrued from natural resources, such as water, cannot be overemphasised (Bonye et al., 2023). These benefits have shaped the interaction between water resources and human actions. This relationship has influenced the ecological make-up of water resources, especially surface water bodies, as their flow is shaped by space and time (Höllermann and Evers, 2020; Karpouzoglou and Vij, 2017). Within this relationship is the concept of power (Swyngedouw, 2000). Whilst power is fundamentally fluid (Foucault, 1983), legislative instruments can shape the ways in which power is accumulated to influence human interactions with water resources and their appropriation. The interactions between water and human actions shaped by power connote waterscape.

Waterscape scholarship is rooted in political ecology, which foregrounds that water is never just a physical resource, but a socio-political entity shaped by power, authority and historical processes.

Political ecology argues that access to and control over resources such as water are structured by socio-political relations, institutional arrangements, and historical trajectories of power, rather than by hydrological characteristics alone (Swyngedouw, 1997). Early political ecology scholars such as Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) demonstrated how environmental problems emerge through structural inequalities rooted in colonial histories, state power, and capitalist development agendas. Robbins (2019) and Escobar (1999) later reinforced the idea that natural resources are always socio-politically produced, contested, and situated within broader regimes of governance and knowledge. Building on this foundation, waterscape thinking extends political ecology by conceptualising water as part of a wider hydro-social field in which material flows, infrastructure, everyday practices, meanings, and governance arrangements co-produce each other (Linton and Budds, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2009).

The concept of waterscape has been used and defined differently to connote the relationship between society and water resources. For instance, Linton and Budds (2014) and Budds (2009) have used the term “hydro-social cycle” to depict waterscape highlighting water as simultaneously material and social, continually shaped by authority, struggle, and inequality whilst Ioris (2017) and Boelens et al. (2016) have rather used “hydro-social territories” to depict waterscape. However, Flaminio et al. (2022) have argued that the context and the scale of use of these terms by the various authors embody some differences than mere interchanging of terms. Waterscape embodies the interactions between water and society and sometimes shape cultural identities (Boelens, 2014). Boelens (2014) further illustrates how water rights, cultural norms, and local governance institutions, particularly in marginalised areas serve as sites of negotiation and contestations, where formal and customary systems intersect.

The literature on waterscape frames water as a site of power; where power defines the flow of water. This power-bound interaction is shaped by the ways in which water travels in time and space as it is shaped by culture and geography (Karpouzoglou and Vij, 2017). Waterscapes are not socially and ecologically neutral (Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Situated within waterscape are the unequal power relations that sometimes produce unequal and gendered outcomes (Karpouzoglou and Vij, 2017). It is within the unequal power situated in waterscapes that FPE scholars frame gendered outcomes in water governance. For instance, Truelove (2011) draws on FPE to argue that these social relations of power sometimes produce gendered outcomes. The next paragraph discusses the waterscape of Ghana.

The waterscape of Ghana is not neutral. It is an assemblage of dynamic socio-ecological characteristics shaped by spatialised manifestations of political ecology, revealing how patterns of exclusion, authority, contestation, and inequality are sedimented in everyday water practices (Amankwaa et al., 2025; Adams et al., 2019). These patterns are embedded in political decisions, economic interests, cultural worldviews, and uneven power relations. The Ghanaian waterscape manifests through a dual governance system: modern/neoliberal and customary/localised paradigms. This is similar to many developing countries (Merrey and Cook, 2012). These paradigms are embedded in the broader discourse of worldviews that underlie them. For instance, the modern/liberal paradigms are shaped as formal governance strategies. These are fronted by the state management strategy, which is rooted in contemporary water governance frameworks underpinned in the SDGs and IWRM. Among many other features, neoliberal frameworks position water as an economic good with formal state management and appropriation authority. This position shapes the way in which water policies from the neoliberal paradigm are framed. This formal expectations of water governance are challenged by the empirical material presented

in this thesis, especially as it relates to customary/localised paradigms of water governance. Chapters Five, Six and Seven reveal the different ways these formalities in water governance is challenged by local cultures and worldviews.

The customary/localised paradigm is shaped by the deep-rooted cultural and worldviews of local people, which are embedded in their physical and non-physical connections with water. In this paradigm, water is framed as a social and cultural entity than an economic good. The position of bricolage in these two paradigms is the assemblage of principles from both paradigms, neoliberal and customary, that interact at various levels in the everyday institutional governance of water at the broader national or local levels. Institutional bricolage “is a process by which people consciously and unconsciously draw on existing social and cultural arrangements to shape institutions in response to changing situations...the resulting institutions are a mix of 'modern' and 'traditional', 'formal' and 'informal’” (Cleaver, 2001, p.27). Cleaver’s (2001) use of “consciously” and “unconsciously” depict that bricolage can be deliberate (mechanical) or undeliberate/accidental (organic). Bricolage focuses on the amendable outcomes produced through the negotiating interactions between institutions that shape the different paradigms of water resource governance (Haider and Cleaver, 2023; Cleaver, 2002).

The water governance systems of Ghana already manifest some form of bricolage (Merrey and Cook, 2012), where customary and modern systems of water governance exist in complementary than in contradiction (Ampomah and Opoku-Ankomah, 2008). However, the Government of Ghana through the District Assembly defines what is acceptable and unacceptable in the interactions between the customary and modern systems of water governance (Opoku-Agyemang, 2005). In Chapter Six, I unpack how the customary and modern systems of water governance interact within the waterscape of Ghana. Table 2 shows the various sources, their nature of access

and control, and scale of interest and politics in Ghana. It provides an overview of the waterscape of Ghana.

Table 2: Sources of water, the nature and scale of access and control politics in Ghana

Source of water	Nature of access and control	Scale of interest and politics	Reference
Groundwater	Domestic access and use	Domestic	Schwartz and Zhang (2024).
Borehole	Communal entitlement	Communal/local level	Amuah et al. (2022).
Wells	Agricultural use	National	Gumma and Pavelic (2013).
Etcetera	Industrial use (small, medium and large scales) National supply (GWCL, CWSA, etc)		Yidana (2010). Anayah and Kaluarachchi (2009) Gyau-Boakye et al. (2008).
Surface water	Domestic access and use	Domestic	Djokoto (2023).
Sea	Communal access and cultural	Communal/local level	Tsikata (2022).
Rivers	entitlements	National	Bessah et al. (2021).
Streams	Agricultural	Regional	Yeleliere et al. (2018).
Ponds	Use	International	Asare-Donkor and Adimado (2016).
Etcetera	Industrial use (small, medium and large scales) National electricity gridding National supply (GWCL, CWSA, etc.) National and regional transportation International use and controls regimes		Cappellazzo (2016).

Source: Author's construct.

2.4 IWRM governance in Ghana and Bamboi

This section focuses on the governance of IWRM in Ghana, and how it relates to formal and informal structures in Ghana. The IWRM rests on three core principles; efficiency, equity, and sustainability of water resources (Yelesi et al., 2018). In Ghana, these principles are formally operationalised through a range of GoG structures, notably the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources and the decentralised local government system comprising District, Municipal, and Metropolitan Assemblies. Whilst the Ministry operates under central government and is headquartered in Accra, the District Assembly (DA) forms part of Ghana's three-tier decentralised governance architecture (Mohammed et al., 2025). The DA functions iteratively: it implements central government policies and plans at the local level, while simultaneously conveying local development priorities upward through the NDPC (NDPC, 2021).

The NDPC serves as the strategic coordinating body integrating global commitments, including the SDGs and IWRM into national development strategies (NDPC, 2020; Tandoh-Offin, 2019; Monney and Antwi-Agyei, 2018). Consequently, sectoral plans produced by Ministries, and later implemented through local government structures, often reflect SDG targets, including those related to water governance (NDPC, 2020). Within this framework, the Bole District Assembly, the local government authority responsible for Bamboi, becomes the primary implementing institution for the SDGs and IWRM-related interventions in the village (Bole District Assembly, 2022).

Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated that the governance of water in Ghana involves a wide constellation of institutions operating at multiple scales (Frimpong et al., 2021; Dapaah and Harris, 2017). Figure 27 provides a succinct illustration of the institutional arrangements underpinning

water policy implementation in Ghana. Although the IWRM provides a formal conduit for governance of water at a macro-level (central governance and strategic spaces such as the NDPC), it dwindles at informal and micro-levels where local people interact with physical water resources. Thus, the persistent gap in Ghana's IWRM implementation lies in the limited capacity of these institutional arrangements to meaningfully incorporate informal water governance systems, many of which are long-established, autochthonous, indigenous, endogenous, culturally embedded, and predating the modern state (Kosoe et al., 2025; Cleaver and Whaley, 2018). This gap, widely observed across the country, contributes to ongoing challenges in the workability and contextual relevance of IWRM (Agyenim and Gupta, 2012). It also generates confusion and tension around the autonomy and authority of longstanding water-preservation rituals and practices in places such as Bamboi. The resulting disjuncture underscores the incomplete nature of Ghana's water governance landscape, which continues to privilege formal state-centred approaches and structures while insufficiently recognising locally driven, water governance institutions.

Beyond the integrative challenges that underline the IWRM in Ghana, the efficiency component of the framework drives access to water from supply-driven nature to a market-centred system with extractive neoliberal tendencies. These tendencies frame water as an economic good which must be extracted for the fiscal benefits it could accrue whilst sidelining the many relational attributes associated with water. These dynamics produce technocratic commodification, where water is framed as a measurable, priced, and administratively managed resource rather than a relational or spiritual entity. Meanwhile, Bamboi continues to rely on informal, relational, and spiritual forms of stewardship to water resources.

Furthermore, the uniform pathway of governing water from IWRM framework has been problematised in water scholarship due to its assumption of universality, coherence, and

institutional functionality in water governance structures in different countries. For example, Evaristo et al. (2023) and Biswas (2008) have doubted the workability of the IWRM due to the complex and unique traditions of various geographies of the world that challenge a uniform traction of solution. This is because societies are characterised by diverse socio-cultural water relations and fragmented governance systems. IWRM's technocratic orientation overlooks the gendered, relational, and emotional dimensions of how people engage with water (see Langill, 2025; Joshi et al., 2024). These insights challenge the framework's tendency to treat water as a depersonalised resource whose value lies in measurable extraction and economic terms. Instead, the thesis demonstrates how gendered water identities, embodied practices, and local forms of stewardship disrupt the rationales and technicalities underlying IWRM and exposes the limitations of the framework in capturing the relational, place-based, and evolving nature of water practices in Bamboi, where governance is neither integrated but dispersed, negotiated, and shaped by everyday interactions and safeguarding practices.

Ghana's IWRM practices provide the formal, state-led architecture for water governance: policy is coordinated centrally and operationalised through national and decentralised institutions (for example, the NDPC, Ministries, Metropolitan, Municipal, and District Assemblies - MMDAs, CWSA), which translate SDG/IWRM targets into sectoral plans and local implementation mandates. In practice, this formal architecture remains technocratic and commodifying, shifting water toward a measurable, priced, administratively managed "economic good" (efficiency, equity and sustainability), whilst struggling to meaningfully integrate long-standing informal and customary systems that organise water use and authority at village level. In Bamboi, these limits are especially visible: despite national IWRM frameworks, everyday governance continuously rely on informal, relational and spiritual stewardship that residents view as legitimate, effective and

obligatory. I conceptualise the resulting arrangement as institutional (water) bricolage, a negotiated assemblage of formal (state, policy-driven) and informal (customary, cosmological, everyday) practices that, together, shape the waterscape and determine who can decide, with what authority, and to what effect.

2.5 Setting the decolonial premises

This section sets the premises and basis on which decolonisation in research and its problematisation of how coloniality still shapes policy and practice in contemporary times is justified. The section begins by unpacking the conceptual foundation, definition and its justification of decolonisation. The study does this by borrowing from the thinking of Mignolo and Walsh (2018). The duo argued that without modernity/coloniality, decolonisation would not exist, thus, decolonisation is justified because colonisation exists; something to decolonise (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Garside (2021) suffices their argument by highlighting that decoloniality makes coloniality visible, and by seeing coloniality, decolonial thinking emerges. Her argument prompts that decoloniality is a critical critique of the relics that colonisation has left behind, creating unequal relations in knowledge scholarship, research work, literature reviews and global policies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023; 2021) and Tobi (2020) have argued that this epistemic injustice requires deeper interrogation. Mignolo and Walsh (2018) describe this interrogation as “epistemic disobedience”. Epistemic disobedience relates to the deliberate decentring of knowledge production methodologies and embodiments from Western and Eurocentric standards that invisibilise different forms of knowing (Deridder et al., 2020), such as African epistemologies. It is within the action of epistemic disobedience that “epistemic freedom” breeds (see Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Epistemic freedom holds the potential for concepts such as African feminisms to shape the discursive nature of gender discourses beyond Western frameworks. Here, African

feminisms is viewed as a decolonial site for the discursive engagement of coloniality in gender (Lugones, 2010). This will shape the way gender has been unjustly framed and subsumed in the purview of Western centrism. The next section unpacks the way African feminisms embody the decolonial framing of gender, especially as it relates to women.

2.5.1 Recentring gender in development: GAD, African feminisms and intersectionality

Debates on gender in development have shifted from WID to WAD and, most consequentially, GAD. GAD reconceptualises gender not as attributes possessed by women but as a relational system of power produced through institutions, structures, norms, and everyday interactions (Miller and Razavi, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Rathgeber, 1990). This shift from “women” to “gender relations” marks a critical departure from WID/WAD approaches, foregrounding how households, markets, customary authorities, bureaucracies, and social networks organise access, voice, and responsibility. In this regard, GAD directs attention to the institutional and political processes that produce and sustain unequal and gendered outcomes, rather than to the simple presence or absence of women in decision-making arenas (Miller and Razavi, 1995; Kabeer, 1994; Molyneux, 1981).

In practice, however, GAD’s relational insights are frequently obscured by technocratic mainstreaming that prioritises numeric targets and committee representation over transformations in underlying power relations (Unterhalter, 2025; Jaquette, 2017). As a result, gender mainstreaming often reverts to WID-style participation which oversimplify the presence of women to gender equity, with limited interrogation of who sets agendas, exercises authority, or controls decision spaces (Jaquette, 2017; Cornwall, 2008; Walby, 2005). This theory–practice gap reduces “gender” to a managerial category and obscures the socio-cultural, political, and economic relations that structure participation and voice (Cornwall, 2008; Walby, 2005).

These concerns are particularly visible in water governance. A GAD lens reveals that gendered outcomes hinge less on sex categories than on proximity to authority, institutional embeddedness, and intersecting forms of social positioning (White, 2000). In Bamboi, for instance, influence over water decisions is shaped by lineage and kinship, ritual authority, seniority, and connections to bureaucratic networks. These relational configurations (not female/male binaries) determine whose knowledge carries weight in decisions about water access, use, and stewardship. This aligns GAD with intersectional critiques of universalised gender mainstreaming and resonates with African feminisms analyses that insist on situated, relational understandings of power (Tamale, 2020). The remainder of the section therefore engages African feminisms and intersectionality as key analytical resources for unpacking the deep-rooted relational dynamics of gender and water governance.

African feminisms provide both a historical and theoretical platform for critiquing the universalising tendencies of Western feminisms, especially their insufficient attention to contextual difference in theorising, practising, and evaluating “gender equality” in non-Western settings. Within this tradition, intersectionality functions as a critical lens that contests universalist claims embedded in global development frameworks, including the SDGs. Since Crenshaw’s (1989) seminal articulation, African feminist scholarship has localised intersectionality to make visible structural discrimination beyond class, gender, race, and sex (Fofie, 2025; Beoku-Betts, 2021; Tamale, 2020; Mama, 2019; Marais, 2019; Nkealah, 2016; Ahikire, 2014; Mikell, 1997; Acholonu, 1995; Dolphyne, 1991; Amadiume, 1987; Thiam, 1986; Steady, 1985). Authors highlight, for example, the salience of age/seniority (Oyewumi, 1997), ethnicity (Mohammed, 2023; Mirza, 2014), and political-economic positioning (Mikell, 1997), thereby demonstrating that the categories that shape gendered outcomes are both multiple and context-specific.

More broadly, intersectionality is now a widely used framework for analysing power relations across social life (Collins, 2019; McCall, 2005). Located within decolonial critiques of the “colonial matrix of power,” it treats the interplay of race, gender, class and other axes as constitutive of hierarchical social orders (Tlostanova et al., 2019). Intersectionality enables analyses of how micro-level social positions intersect to produce macro-level inequalities and how institutions encode and reproduce those inequalities through categorisations of inclusion/exclusion (Collins, 2019; 1998). Importantly, these social identities – gender, sex, class, race, marital and parental status, and other embodied markers – signify heterogeneous positions of privilege and precarity, historically and culturally constituted (McCall, 2005; Collins, 1998).

Late-twentieth-century scholarship used intersectionality to expose the limits of dominant Western feminist organising for understanding the multiplicity of Black women’s experiences in the diaspora (Collins, 2019; Harnois, 2010). Whilst some critique the field for centring women of colour as its “prototypical intersectional subjects” (Nash, 2008) or for its potential to become a routinised buzzword (Aldrin-Salskov, 2020; Warner et al., 2020; Ahmed, 2013), its open-endedness is precisely what has allowed it to travel, expand, and remain analytically generative across contexts (Davis, 2008). Thus, although initially focused on race–gender–sex (Crenshaw, 1989), intersectionality now routinely incorporates ethnicity, age, socio-economic status and other categories across Western and non-Western settings. This flexibility is crucial for a Ghanaian ethnography that decentres “women-as-gender” to interrogate the multi-scalar assemblages through which water governance includes and excludes differently positioned people.

African feminisms and intersectionality do two things for this thesis. First, they expose the reductive conceptualisation of “gender” that underpins much policy and practice, foregrounding instead the heterogeneous and relational nature of social positioning that shapes everyday

inclusion/exclusion. Second, they provide a non-Western, decolonial analytic anchored in African intellectual traditions, thereby contributing to epistemic diversification in knowledge production and to more context-focused approaches to water governance (Beoku-Betts, 2021; Tamale, 2020; Mama, 2019). The next section is a critical engagement of decolonial framings and African feminisms to problematise the westernisation and universalisation of gender theorisation and practice.

2.5.2 Decolonising feminism(s): the paradigms of African feminisms

Decolonial scholarship has increasingly highlighted that knowledge systems shaped by colonial relationships continue to structure how development, governance, and gender are conceptualised in much of the Global South. Scholars argue that when Western epistemologies are uncritically applied in contexts vastly different from those in which they were produced, they frequently generate outcomes that are conceptually inadequate and practically ineffective (Ndofirepi and Ndofirepi, 2020; Tobi, 2020; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Such critiques have fuelled wider intellectual efforts to expose, unsettle, and reframe the Eurocentric foundations that underpin knowledge production in Africa – particularly in gender discourse, where Western theories, categories and assumptions long dominated (Tamale, 2020). As Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) notes, aspirations for Africa’s economic, political and social transformation cannot be realised without simultaneously decolonising the epistemic foundations that define those aspirations.

African perspectives and knowledge production – rooted in context, subjectivity, spiritual worldviews, and lived experience – have historically been rendered secondary or “othered” when measured against Eurocentric norms (Balogun and Woldegiorgis, 2025; Oyewumi, 1997; Collins, 1990; Asante, 1983; 1980). The persistence of these hierarchies validates Mignolo’s (2011) call

for knowledge production to be anchored in decolonial principles capable of disrupting the dominance of Western epistemic authority and undoing its universalist ambitions. However, despite several decades of decolonial critique (Tamale, 2020; Steady, 2005), African epistemologies remain underexplored across disciplines (Etuk and Ibuot, 2024; Dzisah and Kpessa-Whyte, 2023; Boateng, 2016; Kisiang'ani, 2004). Binary categories such as “rural/urban”, “traditional/modern”, “centre/margins”, and “developed/developing” continue to obscure the complexities of African societies and reproduce reductive imaginaries of African womanhood (Dengler and Seebacher, 2019; Boateng, 2016; hooks, 1984). The obscuring of complexities by Western cultures spans across the Global South (Narayanaswamy, 2014; Mohanty and Torres, 1991; Mohanty, 1984).

As such, the need to dismantle Eurocentric universalisms cannot be underplayed (Dengler and Seebacher, 2019) in an effort to decolonise knowledge production about worldviews and perspectives of Africans in Africa, and global discourses. Meanwhile, decolonisation of epistemologies frequently centres race as a primary analytic lens, drawing attention to how whiteness shapes, limits, and legitimises dominant forms of knowledge production. This focus is valuable for interrogating how knowledge geographies are constructed, reproduced and sustained. However, its race-centeredness constrains its practical engagement in racially homogenous contexts such as Ghana (Bamboi), where race does not meaningfully organise social relations. The contention is that decolonisation, whilst theoretically useful, can have redundant explanatory reach in environments where racial heterogeneity is not a structuring force. It is precisely within this limitation that intersectionality offers a more productive and nuanced analytical framework. Consequently, foregrounding how multiple axes of identity including gender, age, sex, spirituality, status, and kinship intersect to shape lived experience in water makes intersectionality a relevant

framing to widen the analytical scope of decolonial critique beyond race and knowledge coloniality alone. This shift enables a more grounded analysis of societal interactions in Bamboi, where everyday power dynamics emerge not through racial difference but through socio-cultural, relational, and embodied practices. The subsequent discussion engages and justifies decolonial and African feminist epistemologies, including intersectionality to illustrate how they more accurately capture the complexities of gender, identity, and power relations in African context.

The need for epistemic reorientation is especially clear in gender discourse (Bedigen, 2022; Narayanaswamy, 2016; Lewis, 2005; Berger and White, 1999). Early knowledge on African women emerged from Western feminist paradigms that were neither grounded in African histories nor attentive to African social realities (Kisiang'ani, 2004). This calls for the rewriting of narratives about gender discourses in Africa (Adomako-Ampofo and Boateng, 2007). Scholars such as Wekker (2016), Collins (1989), Lorde (1985), and hooks (1984, 1981) have long argued that Western feminist frames lacked the conceptual capacity to account for the lived experiences of those positioned at the “margins”. Steady (2005) similarly critiques these paradigms for their methodological rigidity, their “frozen” representations of African womanhood, and their failure to recognise African women’s heterogeneity. These limitations persist within contemporary development frameworks – including the MDGs and SDGs – which continue to position African women as a homogenous category in need of rescue (Bedigen et al., 2021; Boateng, 2016).

Whilst Western feminist activism has contributed significantly to global struggles for women’s political and economic rights, their hegemonic framings have also obscured the diverse realities of African women. Historically, Western feminism emerged in Europe and North America in the latter part of the 16th century as a response to gendered exclusions such as disenfranchisement and labour inequality (Bryson, 2003; Kabeer, 2003). However, its early formations were marked

by clear racial divides: white middle-class women occupied the “centre” of feminist discourse, while Black women were relegated to the margins (hooks, 1984; 1981; Izgarjan and Markov, 2012). The testimonies of Harriet Jacobs and the hyper-sexualised exhibition of Saartjie Baartman (Mama, 1995) demonstrate how race, sexuality, colonialism, and gender intersected in ways that Western feminism failed to acknowledge. Sojourner Truth’s 1851 speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?”, captured this erasure poignantly, revealing how Black women’s struggles could not be assimilated into the prevailing feminist agenda (Truth, 1851; Walker, 1983).

Hence, there was the need for black women, especially those in the West, to rise and fight for their freedoms as well as their political and economic liberation – a complexity that the white women’s struggle for equality could not assimilate. The complexity and intersectional nature of Black women’s issues required that there were separate activisms that would disentangle issues embodied in their unique identities from that of Western-centric feminism. Consequently, African feminists did not emerge merely to “add” African women into existing feminist frameworks but to challenge the epistemic conditions that rendered their experiences unintelligible. Feminists such as Kisiang’ani (2004), Hudson-Weems (2003) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) insist that African women must be understood on their own terms – not through categories produced elsewhere. African feminist writings gained momentum in the 1970s, centred on reclaiming African womanhood from misrepresentation and developing context-specific frameworks for analysing gender (Mekgwe, 2008; Pala, 1977). This intellectual movement recognised that African women’s lives are shaped not by a singular axis of oppression but by intersecting forces including race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, and sexuality (Collins, 2019; Cruz, 2015; Nnaemeka, 2013). The next paragraph unravels the arguments of African feminists and the various theories that have

emanated from African feminisms discourse. The plurality of the term, ‘African feminisms’ is justified.

African women are as diverse as the African continent due to their different backgrounds – in histories, cultures, languages, kinship systems, economic circumstances, and lived experiences (Oyewumi, 2003; Mikell, 1997). Hence, African feminisms is as diverse as the African continent itself, although there are shared values that can be used as organizing principles in discussions about women in Africa (Nkealah, 2006; Kolawole, 2004; Nnaemeka, 2004). It is not surprising that Nnolim (1999) remarks that ‘African Feminism’ is a house divided against itself because of the different contextual theories emanating from it. However, knowledge and reality construction are complex and intersecting (Powell, 2006; Grant et al., 1998). Regardless, Collins (1990) and Steady (1987) suggest that African women from all walks of life have enough elements in common to form a standpoint that is different from Western feminists’ construction of gender. Whilst Collins (1990) and Steady’s (1987) suggestions are important in understanding the standpoint and theoretical underpinnings of ‘African feminism’, it must be stated that there are also a lot of unequal contextual elements such as economic, education, religion, and other factors that create power to differentiate Africans within the African continent and the diaspora (Steady, 2005).

Consequently, Nnaemeka (1998) makes a strong argument that it is more accurate to argue in the context of the pluralism, ‘African feminisms’, than in a monolith, ‘African feminism’, to capture the fluidity and multiplicity of the different cultural imperatives, historical forces, localized realities, strategies and approaches conditioning women’s activism, movements and knowledge production in Africa. Hence, acknowledging this plurality is crucial not only to avoid essentialising African feminist thought but also to ensure that the thesis draws on it in a manner that is grounded,

situated, and contextually relevant to unpacking the unique socio-cultural dynamics of Bamboi's waterscape.

However, a central clarification necessary for this thesis is the recognition that just as African feminisms are not a homogenous body of thought due to the different theoretical and analytic orientation that shape it, so are Western feminisms. Whilst the origins and history of Western feminisms connect them to European cultures, they have transcended different focus and phases of activism through the WID, GID and GAD approaches (Rathgeber, 1990), and evolved through different waves and ideological strands, including liberal, radical, Marxist, poststructural, and intersectional traditions (Shea, 2023). Each evolution creates unique pathways and distinct ontological assumptions that dehomogenise Western feminisms. Recognising this heterogeneity at this point is to prevent the construction of a binary in which African feminisms are positioned as coherent and authentic whilst Western feminisms are portrayed as monolithic and uniform. Instead, this thesis critiques the hegemonic and epistemic whiteness that foreground Western feminist scholarship, such as the historical dominance of Eurocentric epistemologies in global gender and development discourse. The use of epistemic whiteness here is drawn from Aldrin-Salskov (2020) who connects the dominance of knowledge production to the hegemony of Westernism. In the view of Kennedy (2007), the dominance of epistemic whiteness is sometimes silent but invisibly defines the ways and forms of knowledge production. These framings allow African feminisms to interrogate mainstream policy frameworks in water governance such as IWRM and SDG 6, not through a simplistic African versus Western dichotomy, but through a nuanced recognition of the plural intellectual traditions that shape feminist thought globally.

Within this plurality, several major African feminist paradigms have shaped gender discourse and inform this thesis. Hence, the rest of this section focuses on Africa feminisms as a critical

foundation for framing this thesis. I do so by engaging African feminisms in two ways; the first is interrogating the theoretical underpinnings of African feminisms as a critique of dominant and universalist Western knowledge production on feminism and how that permeates the practice of gender. Here, I engage African feminisms as an ontological framing of decoloniality, and a critique of the dominant knowledge production rooted in Western perspectives. The second engagement is unpacking the theories that have been developed by some African feminists to situate the analysis of non-Western worldview on gender and water governance in Ghana.

In the rest of this thesis, I use “African feminisms” instead of “African feminism” to situate the discursive diversity that shapes the concept. African feminist scholarship argues for stronger efforts toward writing about Africa (Odinye, 2022; Boateng, 2016) and for the decolonisation of universalised Western feminist theory and praxis (Steady, 2005). African feminisms – developed by African women, people of African descent, and African scholars in both continental and diasporic contexts – seek to centre African-specific histories and experiences of women. These perspectives, led by scholars and literary writers, critically interrogate mainstream feminism, external development agendas, and imperialism, emphasising how African identities are shaped by global relations of subordination (Lewis, 2002).

African feminisms therefore foreground concerns such as racism, political participation, economic development, sexual discrimination, and localised intersections (ethnicity, age, religion, kinship), all of which produce varying forms of exclusion and inclusion for African women in Africa and the diaspora. They argue that Western feminism inadequately captures the complexity of African women’s contexts, mainly because Western feminist struggles centre equality between men and women, whereas African feminisms do not necessarily treat gender discrimination as the primary or sole form of oppression. In many African societies, gender was not historically the dominant

axis of inequality prior to encounters with Western colonialism (Oyewumi, 1997). African feminists also widen their critique to include insidious neoliberal capitalist policies that impose conditionalities and reinforce economic exploitation across the continent (Bayu, 2019). Consequently, African feminist discourses emphasise broader struggles for equity, justice, and dignity for all Africans – male and female – who collectively experience the burdens of neo-colonial and global exploitation (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2020).

Steady (1987) argues that African feminisms should reject Western feminism's promotion of individualism, competition, and oppositional politics, instead endorsing male-female complementarity to sustain a balanced social ecosystem – particularly given that historical processes and racism have harmed all Africans, though Black men never enjoyed the privileges of white men. Likewise, Walker (1979) highlights that mainstream feminist rebellion emerged from white women's resistance to white male domination but was uncritically extended globally without acknowledging how racism intersects with femaleness to create double oppression for non-Western women. Further, Steady (2005) emphasises that power in African societies is fluid rather than strictly determined by sexual categories – meaning not all men are powerful, nor all women powerless. Western feminism's tendency to reduce African social relations to a male-powerful/female-powerless binary therefore misunderstands African gender dynamics. As Bayu (2019) and Oyewumi (2003) note, Western feminist portrayals frequently depict African women as passive victims of culture or development agendas, an assumption incompatible with African femininity.

African scholars such as McShane (2021) and Kisiang'ani (2004) further argue that African consciousness – of both men and women – cannot be confined to binary categories of male and female. This resonates with Butler's (2004) and West and Zimmerman (1987) argument that

gender is a fluid performative continuum, not biologically predetermined. Supporting this, Oyewumi (1997) introduces the concepts of anatomical/ana-male and anatomical/ana-female to show that in Yoruba society, relational hierarchies were historically defined by seniority (age), not by biological sex; the body was not the primary site of discrimination as it was in the West. Relatedly, Akurugu (2021) provides evidence from the Dagaaba of northwestern Ghana that age and status – rather than sex – structure gendered authority, while Apusigah (2005) shows similar dynamics among the Gurusi of north-eastern Ghana through the performativity of *yi'wie'ne*. Although Oyewumi's (1997) thesis has been critiqued by Bakare-Yusuf (2003) for minimising precolonial gendered disparities, Steady (2005) reinforces that analysing power in Africa solely through sexual categories is insufficient; multiple intersections – including race, class, ethnicity, age, and nationality – shape social relations.

Considering these limitations and misconceptions within Western feminisms, Bayu (2019) argues that Western feminist thought must broaden its analytical scope to include class, imperialism, and exploitation, and must collaborate with diverse feminist traditions to meaningfully address global gendered oppression. This study therefore foregrounds the contextual intersections that shape power and social relations in resource governance systems in African societies. Engaging with these concepts is necessary despite their complexity, particularly to resist epistemic habits that essentialise and overuse certain theoretical vocabularies – such as “intersectionality” – in contemporary feminist scholarship (Aldrin-Salskov, 2020).

African feminisms encompass a diverse set of theoretical models that diverge ideologically from Western “combative” feminist traditions (Nnaemeka, 2015) and attend more broadly to the multiple, intersecting oppressions affecting African women (Tamale, 2020). These models include womanism (Hudson-Weems, 1993; Ogunyemi, 1985; Walker, 1979), Motherism (Acholonu,

1995), Stiwanism (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994), Nego-feminism (Nnaemeka, 2004), and Snail-sense feminism (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012). Each framework offers unique tools for understanding African women lived realities and the socio-political challenges they encounter.

First, womanism, in its diverse articulations, has been shaped by several scholars, including Clenora Hudson-Weems (1993), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) and Alice Walker (1979). Although these authors are often collectively positioned within womanist thought, Hudson-Weems (1993) explicitly distinguishes her theorisation from earlier womanist formations on the grounds that many of those articulations were not sufficiently attentive to the heterogeneity of African people and were often more closely aligned with specific groups – particularly African-American women – rather than the broader global African community.

Walker (1979), writing as an African American feminist, first articulated the term womanist in her work *Coming Apart*, where she unpacked the tangled layers of identity, sexuality and racial oppression shaping the lives of Black women in the United States and Europe. Walker (1983) subsequently employed the metaphor of a girl's transition to womanhood following menarche to symbolise the turbulent, hopeful and often painful journey of Black women navigating a world structured by racialised and gendered violence. Her framing situates womanism as a pathway through which women of African descent take deliberate ownership of their liberation, confronting oppressions that mainstream feminism – dominated historically by white, middle-class women – failed to adequately recognise or address. From this perspective, womanism becomes a conceptual home for the interwoven struggles associated with sex, race, culture, nationality and the pursuit of political and economic freedom (Ogunyemi, 1985).

Building on this foundation, Ogunyemi (1985) further elaborates womanism as an expansive, Africa-centred agenda concerned not only with the gendered subordination of Black women but with the holistic liberation of African people. She argues that the burdens of colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and patriarchal rule weigh not only on Black women but also on Black men and children. Womanism, therefore, seeks a collective emancipation project rather than a struggle that pits men and women against each other. Ogunyemi (1985) frames womanism as accommodationist in the sense that it emphasises meaningful cooperation among Black women, Black men and children – rather than adversarial gender relations – as a necessary strategy for confronting the intertwined oppressions affecting African communities.

Despite its transformative intentions, womanism has been subject to notable critiques. Lewis (2005), for instance, argues that certain formulations of womanism risk collapsing distinct experiences of oppression – such as colonial domination and patriarchal subordination – into a single analytical frame, thereby creating a problematic hierarchy in which one form of oppression risks being privileged over another. Khader (2020), however, counters that it is impractical for decolonial or non-Western feminists to seek to resolve these oppressions sequentially; rather, they must be confronted simultaneously because they operate concurrently in the lived realities of African and African-descended women.

Walker's version of womanism has also been critiqued for its specific grounding in African-American contexts (Hudson-Weems, 1993) and, in some writings, for its openness to erotic affection between women (Amaefula, 2021). Critics such as Mirza (2004) argue that womanism risks essentialising Black womanhood by imposing a singular identity that leaves little room for Black women to articulate their own situated forms of identification. Similarly, Akorede

(2010) and Bryson (2003) question whether womanism inadvertently positions itself as a superior discourse to feminism.

Nonetheless, the significance of womanism remains undeniable. Collins (1986) notes that Black feminist and womanist epistemologies do not claim superiority but rather articulate long-standing intellectual traditions that centre the complex struggles of Black women. Through its recognition of the “double marginalisation” experienced by Black women (Nnaemeka, 2020), womanism has provided conceptual tools for movements such as multicultural feminism (Izgarjan and Markov, 2012) and has contributed to reshaping development thought by calling for Africa-centred indicators, methodologies, and planning practices rooted in local realities.

Hudson-Weems’ *Africana womanism* (1993) further expands this intellectual lineage by deliberately situating the framework within continental and diasporic African cultures. She uses the term ‘Africanans’ in advancing the peculiarity of *Africana womanism* to continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora. Her approach explicitly rejects any derivation from Western feminist traditions and instead advances an African-centred paradigm grounded in eighteen key tenets: self-naming, self-definition, family-centredness, genuine sisterhood, strength, collaboration with men in struggle, wholeness, authenticity, flexible role-playing, respect, recognition, spirituality, male compatibility, respect for elders, adaptability, ambition, nurturing and mothering (Hudson-Weems, 2004).

Whilst *Africana womanism* resonates strongly with African cultural values (Ahmed, 2017) – particularly its emphasis on collective progress and male-female cooperation – it has also attracted critique. Oyewumi (2003) argues that framing African women as primarily “family-centred,” “nurturing,” or “mothering” risks reinscribing limiting gender expectations and constraining how

women's power is conceptualised. She further questions the idea of "sisterhood" in Africana womanism, noting that it echoes Western feminist discourse more than it reflects the lived organising logics of African women.

These debates illustrate the vibrancy and plurality of womanist thought. Rather than a static doctrine, womanism – along with its Africana variant – provides a critical platform for interrogating the intersecting oppressions shaping African and African-descended women's lives. Its contestations are evidence of its intellectual richness, and its continued evolution underscores its relevance in decolonial feminist scholarship and African-centred epistemologies.

Similarly, Catherine Obianuju Acholonu (1995) advances the field of African feminisms through her theorisation of Motherism, a framework rooted in the ideals of mutual love, tolerance, and the protection of family values, emphasising non-violence and cooperative partnership between men and women. Positioned within her broader intellectual and political activism – including her role as Senior Special Advisor to former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo – Acholonu (1995) conceptualises motherism as a socio-cultural project that calls on African women to view themselves, and African society more broadly, through the metaphoric and affective relations of the mother-child bond.

Motherism aligns closely with Steady's (1981) articulation of 'African feminism', particularly in its emphasis on female autonomy, cooperation, the privileging of nature over culture, and the centrality of children, multiple mothering, and kinship structures. However, this framing has generated significant critique. As Nkealah (2016) argues, casting African women primarily as "mothers" risks reinscribing essentialist expectations and limiting the diversity of African womanhood. Similarly, Boehmer (2009) and Driver (1988) caution that motherism, despite its

intentions, can diminish African women's subjectivity and agency by reducing them to symbolic embodiments of motherhood rather than recognising them as complex political actors in their own right.

In addition, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's (1994) theorisation of Stiwanism – Social Transformation Including Women in Africa – marks a significant contribution to African feminisms. As a Nigerian-born academic and social critic, Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) developed Stiwanism as a problem-solving, African-rooted feminist framework intended to clarify the aims of African feminisms and to distance them from the “combative” tendencies associated with Western feminist traditions. She argues that the slow pace of feminist acceptance and progress in Africa is partly due to resistance from men in positions of power, who often misinterpret feminism through the lens of Western confrontational politics.

In response, Stiwanism insists that women must be central to Africa's recovery, reconstruction, and broader development agenda (Allan, 1995). The framework therefore calls for co-partnership – a collaborative mode of social transformation that engages women as equal actors without replicating the antagonistic models of Western feminism (Amaefula, 2021). Through this, Stiwanism acts as a disclaimer against assumptions that African feminists merely imitate Western feminism, repositioning African women at the heart of contemporary political and social transformations on the continent (Allan, 1995).

Despite its usefulness, Stiwanism has been critiqued for its over-reliance on Nigerian socio-political realities, which raises concerns about generalising one national context to represent all African women's experiences. Both Nkealah (2016) and Allan (1995) warn that such generalisation risks creating a new form of hegemony that could obscure or marginalise

non-Nigerian African realities. Nonetheless, the widespread shared conditions and common challenges across African societies provide fertile ground for collective or “commoning” feminist reflections (Nnaemeka, 2003; Collins, 1986). Importantly, Stiwanism offers a valuable analytical lens for examining women’s representation and participation in water governance in Ghana – particularly in northern Ghana – where gender, power, and socio-political dynamics intersect with local environmental and governance structures.

In this paragraph, I have discussed Nego-feminism. Nego-feminism – also known as the feminism of negotiation – was developed by Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), a USA-based Nigerian-born Professor and founder of the Association of African Women Scholars at Indiana University. Grounded in a gender-transformational agenda and oriented toward gender strategic goals², nego-feminism proposes that African women advance their voices and navigate male-dominated structures through the dual strategies of negotiation and “no-ego” (Nnaemeka, 2004). Central to this framework is the conviction that negotiation, compromise, and balance are not merely tactical choices but foundational principles for achieving meaningful social transformation. Nnaemeka (2004) articulates this duality through the notions of “give and take/exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around” (p. 378), offering African women practical routes for engaging, circumventing, or reshaping patriarchal norms across varying contexts.

This approach strongly echoes Ntseane’s (2011) argument that African cultures are fundamentally anchored in negotiation, reciprocity, and collective effort. Thus, embedding women’s voices within negotiations aligns with longstanding African philosophical and social traditions. In this regard, nego-feminism reaffirms the cultural legitimacy of negotiation as a pathway through which

² See Moser (1989).

African women address complex gender challenges across the continent. Further reinforcing its relevance, Alkali et al. (2013) contend that nego-feminism is crucial precisely because African societies continue to reflect male-dominated power structures that privilege men in public and private spheres. Consequently, a confrontational or “combative” approach risks undermining women’s advancement, whereas nego-feminism provides a constructive framework for collective transformation in Africa (Alkali et al., 2013).

Nkealah (2016) extends this conversation by observing that, unlike some African feminist theories tied closely to the cultural background of their originators, the emphasis on negotiation – reinforced using African proverbs – makes nego-feminism widely resonant and accessible to African women across diverse contexts. Importantly, she notes that nego-feminism aligns with the South African philosophy of Ubuntu, thereby enhancing its continental relevance. According to Mayaka and Truell (2021), Ubuntu is grounded in the principles of justice, negotiation, responsibility, equality, collectiveness, relatedness, reciprocity, community, and social change. Nnaemeka’s (2004) linking of nego-feminism to Ubuntu thus underscores African women’s and men’s relational responsibilities in the ongoing negotiation required to build harmonious and ethically grounded communities.

Finally, while Nego-feminism is analytically powerful for exposing power dynamics and intersectional politics – including those shaping women’s participation in water governance – it also illuminates the deeper complexities of gender discourse in Africa. It provides conceptual tools for understanding how African women manoeuvre within sociocultural constraints without reproducing combative Western feminist models. Whilst ending with nego-feminism, the next paragraph further expands the landscape of African feminist theorisation by focusing on Snail-

sense feminism, by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, a Nigerian- born lecturer in Gender Studies at the University of Lagos.

According to Adimora-Ezeigbo (2012), snail-sense feminism is anchored in the principles of individualism, compatibility, and negotiation as pathways for African women's liberation. The theory is rooted in gender complementarity and collaborative coexistence, positioning African men and women as partners rather than adversaries in social transformation. Drawing on the metaphor of the snail, snail-sense feminism conceptualises women's advancement as a gradual, strategic, and environmentally responsive process that enables African women to navigate and penetrate patriarchal structures at a measured but deliberate pace (Nkealah, 2016).

Adimora-Ezeigbo (2012) emphasises the snail's traits – meekness, gentleness, and its non-combative disposition – to argue that African women may sometimes need to retreat, reassess, or move tactically when confronted with hostile sociocultural terrains. This approach advocates a conciliatory and cooperative attitude toward men, enabling women to negotiate their way into meaningful social and political spaces. As Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2020) explains, the metaphor also illuminates the capacity of African women to move steadily through restrictive environments, using resilience, softness, and adaptability as tools for survival and progress. Education, for instance, is named by Adimora-Ezeigbo (2012) as a quintessential “snail strategy” – a slow but transformative mechanism that equips women to uplift themselves, their families, and their nations.

However, while snail-sense feminism provides an alternative interpretive lens for understanding African women's agency, it raises significant conceptual concerns. Critics argue that the framework risks constructing a homogenised and passive image of African womanhood, suggesting that African women are inherently oppressed and must manoeuvre cautiously around

male power. The metaphor of the snail, though evocative, raises important questions about which women can realistically advance through “snail-like” strategies and at what personal cost – particularly in environments where sexism and structural violence severely limit women’s participation and visibility.

In this regard, hooks (2000) cautions that such an approach may inadvertently normalise or legitimise women’s endurance of patriarchal domination by encouraging overly conciliatory behaviours instead of resistance. Moreover, Ezenwa-Ohaeto (2020) argues that the attributes associated with the snail – cowardice, sluggishness, deceptiveness, or environmental timidity – can unintentionally reaffirm Western stereotypes that portray African women as passive, weak, or lacking agency. These concerns illuminate the tensions within snail-sense feminism; between strategic manoeuvring and the potential reinforcement of oppressive norms.

Although these frameworks differ in emphasis, conceptual metaphors and strategic orientations – some prioritising collective emancipation (for example, Womanism and Africana Womanism), others centring cooperation, reconstruction and co-partnership (for instance, Stiwanism and Motherism), and still others advancing negotiation, manoeuvring and strategic socio-cultural navigation (for example, Nego-feminism and Snail-sense Feminism) – they nonetheless converge around several core commitments. Collectively, they advance the decolonisation of feminist thought; insist on situating gender within broader socio-historical, political and epistemic systems; privilege collaboration, relationality and community cohesion; and foreground intersectional analyses attentive to African lived realities. Through these shared orientations, African feminist theories challenge the universalised assumptions of dominant Western feminist paradigms by foregrounding African-centred epistemologies, contextual identities, culturally grounded subjectivities and relational modes of social transformation.

Beyond these conceptual paradigms, a wider body of African feminist and gender scholarship has deepened theoretical and empirical understandings of women's experiences and African politics across diverse geographies. Scholars have examined gendered and political dynamics in Egypt (Karam, 1997), Ghana (Mohammed, 2023; Akurugu, 2021; Bawa, 2018; Bawa and Sanyare, 2013; Tsikata, 1997; Aidoo, 1977), Kenya (Kuria, 2001), Nigeria (Dosekun, 2021; Adichie, 2014), South Africa (Lewis, 1993), Uganda (Tamale, 2020; 2018; Tripp, 2012; 2004), and elsewhere, offering rich analyses of the multiple, overlapping challenges African women encounter. This wider scholarship illuminates how economic deprivation, persistent inequalities, neo-colonial legacies, globalisation's extractive impacts, and entrenched racial and hegemonic relations continue to shape development trajectories across the continent (Lewis, 2005). At the same time, these scholars foreground African women's significant contributions to socio-political transformation, community resilience and the dismantling of patriarchal hierarchies, thereby complicating reductive portrayals of African women as passive or peripheral.

In effect, African feminisms provide powerful analytical insights for diagnosing the complex and intersecting forces that embattle African women – intersections that cannot be adequately captured through “bird-eyed” or external universalist feminist perspectives. Whilst critically interrogating mainstream Western feminisms, African feminisms offer plurality of frameworks and reflections that illuminate the peculiarity, nuance and contextual depth of gender discourse in Africa. These framings enable a grounded, decolonial, and epistemically plural reading of African gendered realities, one that is indispensable for conceptualising power, identity, and social change within African contexts.

2.5.3 Ghana; a case for understanding African feminisms and the hegemony in water governance

Ghana has shown significant strides in discourses related to African knowledge production. Significant contributors to the knowledge production related to Africa are Ama Ata Aidoo and Dr. Kwame Nkrumah whose contributions to neo-colonialism discourses and regional integration of the then new postcolonial states of sub-Saharan Africa cannot be overemphasized. In the space of knowledge production on the multiplicity of gender discourses and deepening the feminist scholarship on the continent of Africa, Ghana and other African countries such as Uganda, Cameroon, South Africa and Senegal have created various institutional platforms and academic units for teaching and research on women and gender studies (Ahikire, 2014). Beyond the significant contribution of Ghanaian figures to the discourses of colonial and postcolonial Africa, Ghana attracts a wide range of interest among scholars and pundits of neocolonialism, Afrocentricity and African identities. For instance, Molefe Kete Asante, a Black American scholar explained the basis for his change of name from Arthur L. Smith and the reasons for selecting “Asante” a southern Ghanaian name (predominantly used among the *Akan* ethnicity) as part of his new Afrocentric names (see Turner, 2002). He revealed that although he does not descend from the specific African countries where his new name originated, each of them was purposefully selected to depict a journey of rediscovery of his identity (Turner, 2002). Stepping aside from Molefe Kete Asante, the Black America musician, Ashanti Shequoiya Douglass (McCann, 2009) in a video interview published by the Jet Johnson Publishing Company on July 1, 2002, also expanded the basis for the choice of her first name, “Ashanti”, and its roots within the Ghanaian society. She particularly emphasizes on the agency she appropriated from the narratives about women in the Asante matrilineal culture. Whilst the choice of names of these

popular personalities remains their personal and inspired decisions but mostly tilted to the Akan, a dominant ethnicity in (southern) Ghana, the processes of choosing and settling on a name “Asante/Ashanti” rooted in Ghana reflect the significance of the country within the discourses of Africanism and Afrocentricity in the world.

Furthermore, Ghana has been significant in African feminists gathering and organising. For instance, in the year 2006 in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, more than two hundred believers of African feminisms gathered to develop a Charter of Feminist Principles for African feminisms. This Charter was geared towards reenergising and reaffirming the multiple dimensions the African feminisms discourse (Ahikire, 2014).

Moving to natural (water) resources, Ghana boasts of a complex interlay of surface and underground water resources that support local domestic consumption and industrial production activities. What remains paradoxical is that despite the deep rooted and time-tested local resource governance systems that rest in socio-cultural practices and local traditions, the country remains a “malnourished breast-fed baby” of international water policies that struggles to fit within local contexts and practices. Whilst the country makes efforts to align, adopt and adapt the SDGs to fit local dynamics through the NDPC (Government of Ghana, 2019), the policies still struggle to translate into everyday practices towards transforming the country’s water sector for providing potable water sources for its citizens, particularly those that would require some form of State support in accessing this basic need.

Although this study does not establish that local “informal” governance structures are in themselves self-sufficient in ensuring access to potable water nor creating equal access to water resources, especially due to the uneven influences that people in local geographical settings

possess (relating to their personal, social, economic, and cultural affinities), the study draws attention to the lapses associated with the existing water governance frameworks in Ghana which is driven by the SDGs. In this framework, the conduits of water decision-making emphasise modernised governance structures such as the local governance structure. The study advances arguments of hybridity of modern and localised systems are in understanding the multiplicity of water issues and the co-production of the two in navigating the cross benefits these two systems produce while negating the adverse effects each could have on access to water resources.

In the context of the previous discussion, Ghana remains a relevant country for examining how African feminisms reveals the shortcomings in the gender discourse surrounding water governance in Africa.

2.6 Feminist political ecology (FPE) as steps beyond political ecology (PE)

Political Ecology (PE) emerged as a significant scholarly field in the 1980s (Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015), shaped by influential works including Robbins (2019), Bryant (2015), Perreault et al. (2015), Biersack and Greenberg (2006), and Zimmerer and Bassett (2003), all of which examine PE's conceptual and methodological foundations (Carpenter, 2020). At its core, PE provides a critical framework for analysing how power operates within human-environment relations. It foregrounds how actors involved in natural resource governance mobilise various forms of influence – both overt and covert – to shape everyday decisions regarding access to and control over environmental resources (Carpenter, 2020).

The overarching objective of PE is to interrogate the interconnections between environment and society, particularly the historical, political, and socio-economic dynamics that inform struggles around resource access (Sultana, 2021). These struggles are embedded within unequal power

structures, as social groups occupy differentiated and often hierarchical positions within society. Although economic power can shape these positionalities, PE scholarship emphasises that power does not rest exclusively with material wealth or formal authority; rather, power circulates through diverse sites and relations (Wyatt et al., 2022; Foucault, 1983). Despite this conceptual breadth, the analytical orientation of PE has tended to lean toward Marxist interpretations of power (Carpenter, 2020). At the same time, critiques highlight that PE has historically reproduced masculine biases in its analyses, often overlooking the gendered nature of environmental access, knowledge, and politics (Loftus, 2009). PE has also been critiqued for being grounded in uneven geographies of knowledge production – dominated by Western, Eurocentric, patriarchal, and colonial capitalist worldviews (Castro-Gómez, 2021; Sultana, 2021; Bryant, 2015). This dominance has frequently marginalised local, embodied, and intersectional experiences that shape resource struggles across different global contexts.

Due to this marginalisation of gendered and intersectional dynamics, early PE scholarship largely ignored women's long-standing participation in environmental protection, resource activism, and ecological stewardship (Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015; Rocheleau et al., 1996). Meanwhile, women's involvement in environmental politics is neither recent nor peripheral. As documented by Newman (2014), women have historically mobilised to protect their environments across varied ecologies – urban landscapes, forests, agrarian fields, rangeland ecosystems, mountainous terrains, and coastal zones. Harcourt (2012) similarly illustrates how ecofeminists, feminist environmentalists, post-structural, postcolonial, and decolonial feminist scholars have long emphasised the centrality of women's knowledge and activism in safeguarding ecological and livelihood systems.

It was in response to these silences within PE that Feminist Political Ecology (FPE) emerged in the 1990s (Sultana 2021; 2009; Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015; Rocheleau et al., 1996). FPE explicitly interrogates gendered relations within struggles for access to, and control over, natural resources. It brings into analytical focus the contextual, everyday experiences of differently positioned actors, emphasising how gender, power, justice, and intersectionality shape resource governance (Harcourt, 2019). FPE highlights how subjectivities, embodiment, emotions, situated knowledges, commoning practices, post-humanist perspectives, and the dismantling of rigid theory-practice binaries are critical for understanding how people experience and negotiate environmental issues across contexts. Decolonial FPE scholarship extends this further by foregrounding non-Western epistemologies, alternative ontologies, and culturally grounded worldviews (Sultana, 2021; 2015; Harcourt, 2019; Sundberg, 2017; Elmhirst, 2015; Harris, 2015; Rocheleau, 2015).

Methodologically, FPE scholars employ ethnographic and qualitative approaches – including participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, focus groups, oral histories, and transect walks – to capture the nuances, connections, and complexities inherent in lived experiences (Sultana, 2021; Truelove, 2019). This methodological grounding reflects FPE's commitment to articulating multiple worlds, cultures, and knowledge systems when analysing gendered positionality within resource governance (Rocheleau and Nirmal, 2015).

According to Sultana (2021) and Truelove (2019), FPE's emphasis on gendered access, control, and management of natural resources – alongside household relations and community politics – exposes complexities that mainstream governance frameworks often obscure. This makes visible how intersectional identities shape environmental decision-making at household, community, regional, and national levels. Representation, in this regard, is essential to pursuing decolonial

futures, as it widens the epistemic space within which environmental governance is conceptualised (Sultana, 2021). FPE contributes to a deeper understanding of power as a relational process shaped through intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, ability, and religion (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2018). Death (2014) complements this by defining power in resource governance as the ongoing process through which identities, relationships, ideas, and knowledge are produced and sustained – a perspective that is critical for understanding the politics of “best practices,” expertise, and participation within resource governance.

FPE also aims to provide a basis for improving social and environmental conditions through a decolonial feminist critique and political action by considering the different perspectives based on intersectional categories such as gender, race, class, and sexuality. This means that it does not only look at the relationships between gender and the environment but also the collective impact of the interactions between social and spatial relations. Bukachi et al. (2021) have argued that rural settings cannot be treated as a homogenous entity where people’s experiences are uniform due to the intra and inter-group dynamics that mark their existence and influence relations with natural resource access. It is at this point that exploring the waterscape of Bamboi is important in understanding the overarching dynamics of water governance in an everyday living context.

The decolonial foundations of FPE further critique the concentration of knowledge production within academic or institutional “centres,” calling for epistemic approaches that recognise grassroots (Castro-Gómez, 2021) and marginalised knowledge systems – places outside sources of dominant knowledge production (hooks, 1984). As argued by Truelove (2019) and Adams et al. (2018), such an approach helps evaluate inclusion and exclusion in resource governance beyond narrow concerns with numeric representation. FPE’s engagement with subjectivities and intersectionality is particularly relevant to decolonial feminists, who emphasise how race, ethnicity,

and religion shape contextual expressions of patriarchy and other power structures within resource governance (Mollett and Faria, 2013; Nightingale, 2011; Sultan, 2011). Without integrating such intersectional analysis, resource governance risks overlooking the differentiated ways various social groups experience and navigate access, control, and management of natural resources such as water (Truelove, 2019).

A body of FPE scholarship – including Truelove (2019), Adams et al. (2018), Thompson (2016), Mollett and Faria (2013), Sultana (2011), Harris (2009), and O'Reilly (2006) – demonstrates how water governance is deeply shaped by gendered, classed, racialised, ethnic, and religious identities. For example, Truelove (2016; 2011), Birkenholtz (2013), Sultana (2011), and Joshi and Fawcett (2005) document how caste, ethnicity, education, marital status, and age mediate water access in Southern Asia. Similarly, Adams et al. (2018) show that diverse intersectional categories – not just gender – determine patterns of inclusion and exclusion within Malawi's Urban Water User Associations.

Considering these debates, reflecting on the inadequacies of mainstream knowledge production surrounding intersectionality in resource governance reveals the necessity for in-depth empirical accounts that examine how contextual intersections actively produce and reproduce forms of power, voice, inclusion, and exclusion in governing critical natural resources such as water.

2.7 Decoloniality, feminism(s) and cultural relativism: tensions and similarities

In this section, the universalisation of global goals – particularly as they pertain to gender – is used as an analytical site for comparing and contrasting the framing of (epistemological) cultural relativism as a decolonial thought. The discussion deepens the critique of the hegemonic proliferation of mainstream feminist constructs and the ways these constructs shape global gender

mainstreaming agendas. As the world increasingly embraces plural epistemic spaces – where diverse voices, worldviews and lived experiences matter for shaping universal development goals – it becomes necessary to foreground the standpoint of decolonial feminism (for example, Narayanaswamy, 2016; 2014; Mignolo, 2011; Oyewumi, 2003; 1997; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Mohanty and Torres, 1991; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 1984) alongside cultural relativism (for instance, Lee, 2021; Msuya, 2019). These bodies of thought together unpack and unsettle Western-centred knowledge formations that have long dominated global politics and the agenda-setting processes shaping gender discourses.

Decolonial feminists have consistently raised concerns about the partiality and limitations of Western-centric feminism. They argue that Western feminism – in both theory and praxis – rests primarily on a binary framing of gender inequality (typically between males and females), while insufficiently addressing the intersectional experiences that shape the lives of diverse women across different social, cultural, racial and geopolitical locations. This orientation not only silences but also invisibilises the voices and realities of women from the Global South, including Black women, by determining what “development” ought to look like through Western experiences and epistemic norms. As noted earlier in this chapter, several feminists from the Global South have critiqued Western-centred feminism for generalising women’s needs and lived experiences as synonymous with those of Western women in the Global North (Charlesworth and Chinkin, 2022; Charlesworth, 2005). In practice, however, societies differ substantially in their desires, perceptions, needs, worldviews and lived realities (Lee, 2021). Since cultural formations reflect specific histories and ontologies (Lee, 2021), it becomes essential to examine intersections and contextual realities in order to determine “which category of women” a particular development or governance agenda (Charlesworth, 2005) serves. Consequently, the world-views, needs,

experiences, and strategies for gender mainstreaming – particularly as they pertain to women and vulnerable groups – cannot be treated as universal or uniform across all societies.

Relatedly, Mele and Sanchez-Runde (2013) argue that cultural relativism rests on the premise that “outsiders” can only meaningfully understand the values, practices and belief systems of a culture when interpreted through the perspectives of those *within* that culture. This renders culture subjective, contextual and deeply grounded in “insider” worldviews. Epistemological cultural relativism further maintains that different societies hold different ways of knowing and interpreting the world; thus, no single epistemic framework can claim universal validity (Lee, 2021; Brown, 2008). These arguments highlight the importance of attending to localised dynamics and worldviews that shape resource (including water) governance in diverse contexts. Local worldviews evolve alongside the shifting cosmovision and cultural rhythms of communities. Conversely, universalisation processes are rarely informed by such plurality; instead, they draw predominantly from contemporary Western paradigms. Hence, cultural relativism underscores the inherent biases embedded within development agendas that promote internationalisation and universalisation – especially those underpinning UN goals and frameworks.

Much of cultural relativist critique focuses on the universalisation of UN goals and frameworks – both conceptually and in practice – due to their close historical ties with Western cultures. Cultural relativists assert that Western cultural norms often become encoded as “universal human rights”, thereby imposing expectations that all cultures must conform to Western values, irrespective of their distinct histories or evolving social formations. This is where Western hegemony becomes visible. For example, cultural relativists argue that human rights are derived from culture itself; culture embodies the everyday lives, practices and institutional arrangements designed to protect human dignity (Msuya, 2019). According to Msuya (2017), contemporary international human

rights frameworks are rooted primarily in Western cultural experiences. Meanwhile, Lee (2021) asserts that global cultures differ yet are equally important. Thus, when human rights become internationalised through Western cultural assumptions, the result is an inherently hegemonic project (Msuya, 2017).

Although tensions between cultural relativism and the universalisation of human rights – and the internationalisation of development pathways – are long-standing, the critiques raised by relativists concerning patriarchal, Eurocentric and Western-led generalisations remain deeply relevant for contemporary research, especially in local contexts overshadowed by Westernised development imaginaries (Lee, 2021). However, Msuya (2019) and Namazie (2012) warn that relativism has at times been essentialised by political and religious leaders to legitimise oppressive practices, particularly those violating the civil and political rights of women in parts of sub-Saharan Africa. Lee (2021) refers to this as *political cultural relativism*. Epistemological cultural relativism is distinguished from political forms of relativism by prioritising the analysis of how knowledge is produced, legitimised, and deployed across different cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, Abadeer (2015), Coomaraswamy (2002) and Brems (1997) argue that mainstream feminism itself has demonstrated a disconnect between feminist advocacy and the application of international human rights. Although human rights frameworks proclaim equal rights for all humans irrespective of sex, the practice of human rights – especially economic and civil rights – has historically centred men's interests more than those of women.

More recently, scholars such as Lee (2021; 2019) and Mignolo (2012) have articulated the conceptual connections between decolonisation and relativism by foregrounding how global knowledge production and development praxis continue to rely on Western constructs. Their

critiques highlight how the universalisation of development goals consistently sidelines the cultural, racial, historical, ethnic and colour-based differences that shape diverse contexts. From this perspective, decolonisation and cultural relativism converge in the assertion that international development frameworks must critically engage with local contexts and intersectional realities that mainstream feminism and global development agendas often ignore. Intersectional markers – race, colour, ethnicity, class, identity and religion – therefore become critical sites for articulating and responding to women’s varied needs. Failure to attend to such contextual intersections renders international development goals performative and impractical. Unsurprisingly, both decolonial feminists and cultural relativists reject the homogenisation of global histories and experiences under Western narratives, particularly within gender and development debates (Khader, 2020; Msuya, 2019). Still, rather than rejecting human rights or international development altogether, scholars argue for re-envisioning them in ways that foreground and critique the Western hegemonic undertones that permeate these frameworks (Waites, 2020).

Importantly, tensions between mainstream feminism and cultural relativism arise because each frames the other as essentialising women and harbouring “hidden” political agendas – either by advancing Western cultural hegemony or reinforcing oppressive cultural norms (Reitman, 1997). Cultural relativists argue that just as mainstream feminists critique universalism for privileging male interests, mainstream feminists themselves implicitly centre a particular kind of woman – Western, non-minority, and culturally assimilated – as the benchmark for who “deserves” human rights (Reitman, 1997). In this framing, mainstream feminists appear as agents of Western ideological dominance who essentialise “women” whilst erasing the identities and needs of non-Western women (Coomaraswamy, 2002; Brems, 1997).

Regardless, Msuya (2019) shows that political and religious leaders frequently instrumentalise regressive cultural norms to suppress the civil and economic rights of women – especially in patriarchal, postcolonial African contexts – thereby essentialising culture itself to maintain unequal power structures. Likewise, as Lee (2021) notes, political relativists often silence women’s voices by deferring to state-sanctioned or male-dominated interpretations of culture (Reitman, 1997). Women who challenge such norms can face social sanctions (Mayer, 1995). Mayer (1995) thus argues that while relativists critique universality as a tool of Western dominance, relativism itself can become a vehicle for protecting male-centric cultural power. Despite these tensions, both feminism and cultural relativism converge on a shared principle: the dominant constructions of universality – particularly in global governance and human rights – are deeply problematic. Therefore, respecting difference, whether sexual or cultural, is fundamental (Brems, 1997).

2.8 Conclusion of the chapter

This chapter has located gender and water governance within the broader decolonial frameworks of African feminisms, FPE and (epistemological) cultural relativism, positioning these as the principal conceptual foundations through which the thesis responds to the overarching research questions. In doing so, it has explicitly articulated how these frameworks critique and extend dominant gender-water scholarship. The chapter has therefore engaged these frameworks not only descriptively but analytically, demonstrating how each exposes the simplicities, silences, and universalised assumptions embedded within mainstream global water governance mechanisms – particularly SDG 6 and the gender-mainstreaming agenda that underpins it.

Central to this critique is the argument that Westernised feminist histories and assumptions have hegemonically shaped global development paradigms, including the SDGs, resulting in the exportation and normalisation of Western-centric gender logics within non-Western governance

contexts. The chapter highlighted that these universalised frameworks inadequately reflect the realities of African societies, where gendered experiences are dynamically produced through multiple and intersecting socio-cultural categories. The concept of intersectionality, as articulated within African feminisms and FPE, thus provided the analytical conduit for unpacking the multi-layered and interconnecting positionalities that shape inclusion and exclusion in water decision-making. This emphasis sets the premises for deploying intersectionality to understand water governance in Bamboi.

The chapter opened by situating politics within the broader spectrum of water decision-making. It established that water governance unfolds within evolving geographies of power – what waterscape scholars conceptualise as the dynamic, fluid entanglements of water, people, institutions, and socio-political relations. This framing clarified the epistemological grounding for analysing the Black Volta River and Bamboi as a waterscape in Chapter Four and provided the conceptual basis for answering the first research question: “*What are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana, and how do they manifest in Bamboi?*” By emphasising the fluidity of human-water relations and the historical-political contingencies through which these relations evolve, the chapter strengthened the analytical bridge between global governance frameworks and local realities.

Next, the chapter problematised the conceptualisation of gender within water governance by demonstrating how dominant development discourse – shaped by Western-centric feminist histories – frames gender in reductive, binary and universalist ways. African feminisms were therefore mobilised as a critical epistemic site for disrupting this universalism. The discussion underscored that Western feminist constructions of gender inequality neither reflect contemporary African realities nor capture the lived dynamics of gender within Western societies themselves,

outside of the experiences of white, middle-class women. Instead, African feminisms reveal how intersections – including race, age, marital status, kinship, religion, economic status and spirituality – configure the authority, voice, and participation of differently positioned men and women within everyday governance spaces. This argument sets the stage for Chapter Five, where intersectionality is operationalised in responding to the second research question: “*Who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi?*”

Furthermore, the chapter engaged the arguments of FPE as a feminist “rebirth” of political ecology. FPE’s deliberate grounding in decoloniality, intersectionality, and context-attuned methodological approaches was shown to be crucial for analysing the gendered dynamics of natural resource decision-making. FPE makes visible the affective, embodied and socio-political processes that shape everyday experiences of water access and governance – dimensions that mainstream water governance models often overlook. These theoretical underpinnings provide the conceptual foundation for Chapter Seven, which addresses the fourth research question: “*How are local and customary institutions gendered?*” The emphasis here is the establishment of the linkage between FPE and the thesis’ conceptualisation of gendered power beyond representation.

In addition, the chapter critically unpacked (epistemological) cultural relativism to challenge how diverse cultures are subsumed under Western epistemic and institutional logics within UN global development frameworks. Epistemological cultural relativism was shown to provide a decolonial lens for interrogating the universalisation of “modernity” paradigms embedded in institutional mechanisms such as the SDGs, revealing how these frameworks reproduce tensions, inconsistencies and governance frictions when implemented in non-Western contexts. The chapter also demonstrated how, in Chapter Six, epistemological cultural relativism is brought into dialogue with institutional (water) bricolage to answer the third research question: “*How do local and*

customary institutions interact with formal water governance institutions?” This conceptual pairing illuminates how diverse cultural principles, institutional logics and governance practices assemble into the hybridised water governance system characteristic of Bamboi.

Finally, the chapter clarified how these conceptual framings directly informed the methodological choices outlined in Chapter Three. It signposted how African feminisms, FPE and (epistemological) cultural relativism shaped the adoption of a decolonial feminist ethnography, with its attentiveness to positionality, immersion, relational ethics, and contextual knowledge production. This methodological positioning demonstrates the decolonial and epistemological commitments of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

3 Undertaking (decolonial feminist) ethnography in Bamboi, Ghana

3.0 Introduction

This research is shaped by the methodological framework of decolonial feminist ethnography for two reasons; theoretical justification and the greyness of the study area (in terms of detailed research that accounts for the village's connectedness to the BVR and other sources of water in social-cultural, political and gendered terms). Theoretically, underpinning this study in the decolonial lenses of African feminisms, FPE and (epistemological) cultural relativism required a methodological approach that is marked by exploratory flexibility and reflexivity but with a focus on the dynamics of power between the research and the researched, to engage the deep-rooted dynamics that embody the everyday fibres of the social setting. Furthermore, some FPE scholars have justified the ability of (decolonial feminist) ethnography to drive empirical research which is shaped by the theoretical frameworks of FPE (Sultana, 2021; Truelove, 2019).

The greyness of Bamboi in terms of a study that unveils the everyday social-cultural, gendered and political experiences that uniquely shape the governance of water, and its produced outcome justify situating of the study the village. A google scholar search without a date range on the theme, “water governance in Bamboi, Ghana” reveals a cluster of work in which Bamboi is mostly studied along other geographical settings as flow and sub-stations within the Black Volta Basin to determine annual flow and other geomorphological characteristics (Afedor et al., 2024; Abungba et al., 2022; Akandi, 2013; Odame-Ababio, 2004), determine effects of the Bui Dam on it (Owusu et al., 2019; Arthur, 2017) and as a host of the Babator farms (Caminati Engström, 2020). These two reasons drive the adoption of ethnography to deeply engage the various facets of water governance in Bamboi to respond to the main research question: what prospects and

possibilities do African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism offer for decolonising water governance?

This chapter begins with the position of decolonial feminist ethnography within the broader ethnographic design. I then unpack the theoretical basis of the sampling processes. This is followed by the description of the study area; providing premises of the demographic and administrative characteristics of Bamboi and its water resources. Being positioned as an “outsider” in Bamboi, I briefly discuss my research positionality and how I negotiated power dynamics during the process of the fieldwork. I then discuss how I planned my field trip and the changes that occurred during the fieldwork and the decisions I made during those such changes. The other aspects discuss how I engaged with the key informants and gatekeepers of the village and the themes I generated from the fieldwork to respond to the research questions. The rest of the chapter discusses the field challenges and the processes of physically exiting Bamboi.

3.1 Designing and undertaking a (decolonial feminists’) ethnography in Bamboi, Bole

District

This section unpacks the methodological approach of decolonial feminist ethnography. Decolonial feminist ethnography has its roots in classical ethnography. It recognises the dominant tendencies of Westernised and Eurocentric history of knowledge production and worldviews (Mohammed, 2026; Manning, 2018), whereas ethnography is arguably rooted, shaped, and organized around colonial encounters (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2019; Faier and Rofel, 2014). The first step in decolonising research is to be accountable for addressing these histories. Although research is often commissioned for the benefits of society, it is also shaped by and for the dominant societies and interests of its time (Gibbons et al., 1994). It can continue a system that maintains injustice or shift perspectives to challenge existing stereotypes, misconceptions,

and long-standing prejudices (Deridder et al., 2022; Kennedy et al., 2022; Gagnon and Novotny, 2020).

Historically, research has been a site of power; promoting social justice or augments social unfairness. The inclusion or exclusion of marginalized groups and knowledge production is constructed to support the status quo. Decolonisation therefore distinguishes research to stand on the side of “othered” forms of knowledge production. It further recognises that the research process and the representation of research findings are power bound; where the researcher is powerful whilst the researched is powerless. Hence, this approach to ethnography is a reflective process for the researcher to recognise this power relationship and their positions in this relationship while creating actions to diffuse it by deliberately decolonising the data collection and representation processes to reflect the worldviews, opinions, experiences, stories and narratives of research participants.

Consequently, the use of decolonisation within the context of this methodology relates to the admonition of Mohammed (2026) on ethical data collection processes that are underpinned in respect for local perspectives, cultures and worldviews – rather than absolute co-production of the entire research (from conception to analysis) and ownership (claiming authorship of the final content). Before diving into the perspectives of decolonial feminist ethnography, I discuss the features and characteristics of ethnography in the next paragraphs.

Ethnography is a research design that emanated from anthropology (Mullick et al., 2013). It is a descriptive research design that consists of multiple methodological approaches, including the use of techniques such as short- and/or long-term participant observation, interviews, photographs, videos, and group field work towards understanding the ways of life of different social and cultural groups by immersion in the groups’ lived, everyday experiences (Reyes, 2018). Thus, it

is characterised by a researcher observing (by participating) and reporting/writing/interpreting what has been observed on a particular group of people and their culture (Naidoo, 2012; Murchison, 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Ethnography, therefore, attempts to respond to the question of comprehending complex and consequential senses of ‘how things are’ and to know it in a particular way, as a participant observer or learner under consideration. As a qualitative research design, it is underpinned in the constructivist or interpretivist worldview and philosophy (Edwards and Skinners, 2020). An interpretivist approach to research dwells on purposeful investigation of smaller samples to gain deeper insights into a phenomenon (Hong and Cross Francis, 2020), as opposed to positivist research. The purpose of this approach to research is not necessarily generalization, hence qualitative researchers do not use large sample sizes to investigate social phenomenon (Kroeze, 2012).

The most significant characteristic of this design is the importance it places on context and subjective interpretation. The purpose of qualitative approach to research is to generate a complex understanding of human behaviour. Therefore, rather than being concerned with measuring various variables, pieces of information, or attitudinal constructs, qualitative studies are typically concerned with understanding how people make sense of their world, worldviews. Hence, adopting a design that is rooted in the paradigms of ethnography for this study was appropriate in understanding the extent the decolonial lenses of African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism unpack how water decision making in Bamboi is shaped by the different layers of their worldviews and social interactions.

The rest of this section focuses on unpacking the foundation of decolonial feminist ethnography, starting from the concept of decolonisation. The final part discusses the weaknesses of the research design.

Quite recently, Manning (2018) has presented decolonial feminists' ethnography as a critical ethnography where researchers are conscious of their position and representation as an 'insider-outsider'. According to Crowley-Henry (2009), 'insider-outsider' is the process through which the ethnographers' transition and immerse themselves in the ethnographic field through repetitive questioning of the ethnographic community's cultural categories and constructs. I have established my "insider-outsider" positionality in section 3.2.

Decolonisation is the process of recognising that knowledge production and scholarship are power-bound and currently framed along racial lines (Mohammed, 2026; Thambinathan and Kinsella, 2021), where Westernised and Eurocentric ideas dominate non-Western ideas. In that regard, decolonial research rests in decoloniality, which is embedded in opening unique forms of knowledge with the aim of dispelling Western and Eurocentric thoughts as the only framework and means for knowledge production (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2015). Furthermore, decolonial research adapts the questioning lines of Kilomba (2021, p.30); "What knowledge has been made part of academic agendas? And what knowledge has not? Whose knowledge is this? Who is acknowledged to have the knowledge? And who is not?" And that of Spivak (2023): "Can the subaltern speak?" Consequently, decolonial research takes off from the point that the researcher recognises the coloniality of dominance forms of knowledge production and their own positionality on the research environment and the outcomes of the research.

Since decolonising research focuses on unsettling research from Westernised views towards the concerns and worldviews of non-Western spheres (Mohammed, 2026), the perspectives of the previously "Other(ed)" are the basis of knowing and understanding theory (Smith, 2021). The decolonisation research process sees the researcher and the research as important components of the research process and outcomes. Hence, Datta (2018, p.2) argued that, "decolonisation is an

on-going process of becoming, unlearning, and relearning regarding who we are as researchers and educators, and taking responsibilities for participants”, whilst Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) argued that decolonial researchers immersed in decolonising research process do not limit themselves as scholars but take active roles. The arguments of Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021) and Datta (2018) were the pivotal points of my immersion in Bamboi, where I participated in the village’s everyday life such as fetching water from wells for domestic activities such as bathing and cooking, attending certain church and funerals when invited, and an Easter picnic organised by the next southwards village, New Longoro, in conjunction with Bamboi. In these events, I positioned myself as a participant rather than a scholar who would have been taking notes and asking questions.

Furthermore, Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p.1) argued that a decolonised research process should be practiced along these four principles: exercising critical reflexivity, incorporating reciprocity and respect for research participants’ self-determination, embracing the “Other(ed)” ways of knowing and embodying a transformative praxis. These reflective principles guided the fieldwork of this ethnography; relating with local people in ways that built trust, respect and ownership of the research findings by openly discussing research findings with village leaders and entire village through an open forum at Bamboi Community Centre. The third principle espoused by Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p.1), “embracing the ‘other(ed)’ ways of knowing” drove my focus to the localised and cosmic worldviews that shape local decisions on water (especially as it relates to the BVR) in the village through the Priesthood safeguards of the Koorafon (I have briefly discussed the Koorafon some sections of this chapter and in details at Chapter Six). This shaped the themes of Chapter Six of the thesis. The rest of this section discusses the lapses of an ethnographic study such as this.

As with several qualitative research designs (Harry and Lipsky, 2014; Thompson, 2017) such as case studies, the representative and generalisation of the findings of ethnographic works have often been doubted due to the smaller nature of the sample size as compared to designs such as experimental studies (Aspers and Corte, 2019; Hammersley, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). To Silverman (2012), this can eliminate sensitive contexts that could have been highlighted in frequency and central tendencies if a large sample size was studied. Consequently, Sallee and Flood (2012) and Berg (2009) argue that qualitative research comparatively suffers credibility.

However, one of the main strategies for overcoming the challenges of qualitative research such as ethnography is the use of triangulation. Triangulation is the use of different methods and diverse participants to validate the data taken (Yin, 2009). Regardless, unlike other qualitative research designs, the strength of ethnography is in the use of different data collection methods and instruments. These methods and instruments complement the shortfalls of each other and serve as triangulation strategies. To that effect, the study used different data collection methods, which included IDIs with Key Informants (KIs) and participant observation to triangulate data taken during the fieldwork. As such, the incidence of eluding sensitive contexts and the credibility of research is out of context.

Furthermore, the longevity of a research process coupled with multiple data collection methods improves the validity of data collected. Due to the ten-month span of this ethnography, I was present in the village to validate the dates and times of events and festival quoted by some key informants. For instance, a Key Informant had revealed in an interview that the annual sanctification of the BVR usually took place in a day within April and June. However, it was rather done in the month of February during the ethnography, invalidating the earlier response of

the Key Informant. This became a point for further follow-ups with various key informants on the change in the annual sanctification date. It was during this triangulation that it was revealed the sanctification is supposed to take place in the first quarter of each year to appreciate *Korowii* (Almighty God) and the cosmic world (ancestors and spirits) for the water/natural resources and bumper harvest. However, due to the lack of consistent funds to purchase items for the rituals such as the white ram (in Chapter Six, I detail the items), the event is usually postponed until the items are gotten through donations or contributions from the village residents. Approaching this study through a survey might have missed this reality and turn-around of information that participant observation offered to this research. This was reflective for reorganising questions and improving data validity.

3.2 Research positionality

Research positionality reflects the researcher's self in terms of knowledge, experiences, and other personal attributes that influence his or her research (Duran et al., 2025). In ethnography, positionality implies the interconnectedness of the different layers of personal experience connected to conducting research. Thus, it embodies the psychological, emotional, relational, experiential, ontological and ethical dimensions, arising from the researcher's unique subjectivity and the specific time and space in which he or she is positioned. These are reflected in the socio-cultural attributes, political orientation, values, and belief systems, intersectional attributes: gender, class, and caste, and how one is situated power-wise in the research process; data generated and how it is presented (Ríos and Patel, 2023).

Positioning oneself is situational; it is a matter of who one is dealing with and who one is. The position of the ethnographer is multi-dimensional and multi-situated. Thus, research positionality enhances researchers' ability to come to terms with the reality that the knowledge generated from

the field is situated and their identity plays an extricable role in the research and the research process.

Based on the reflections above, I position myself in this ethnography as a young Ghanaian woman with fluid and dynamic socio-economic characteristics. I was born and raised in the Ashanti Region and later lived in the Upper West Region for my undergraduate and postgraduate studies before relocating to Leeds, United Kingdom in 2021 to pursue this PhD. Although I was a full-time student and formally unemployed during fieldwork, my funded doctoral status placed me in a position of significant economic privilege relative to both rural and urban contexts in Ghana. In Bamboi, this translated into an income level comparable to high earners in the village. Conscious of the power embedded in such perceived economic privilege, I deliberately moderated my lifestyle, particularly the technologies I used and the nature of my daily purchases to avoid projecting an elevated social status. This was essential for reducing hierarchical perceptions and fostering more balanced, open engagements with participants.

Finally, at the time of this ethnography, I was in my early thirties. In the Ghanaian context, a 30-year-old is still considered a “young person” and often perceived as a ‘child’ when interacting with older adults. Acknowledging this age hierarchy, I was intentional about sustaining the interest and trust of older key informants. Ethnicity also shaped my positionality. Although Ghana is ethnically diverse and largely harmonious, sharp cultural differences, reinforced by colonial histories, have produced subtle hierarchies in which some southern ethnicities, including the Akan, often hegemonically perceive themselves as culturally “superior” to the ethnicities of the north. As an Akan woman and a predominant Twi speaker, I was aware of how this identity could influence perceptions of me in Bamboi, and the entire data co-production. For instance, despite having lived and studied in northwestern Ghana since 2012 and having basic proficiency in *Waale*,

I could not speak Mo/Deg, the indigenous language of Bamboi. Whilst communication was facilitated through Asante Twi and Bono (which are non-Mo languages but widely spoken by the Mo/Deg), I recognised that relying on these languages risked missing culturally embedded expressions, especially proverbs and idioms central to Mo/Deg worldviews. Mohammed (2026) warns about this risk. This linguistic limitation was therefore an important dimension of my positionality in the field, that I had to sensitively navigate by relying on the Mo language prowess of my native research assistance.

3.3 Choosing the ethnographic field, Bamboi

Choosing a field site is one of the most consequential decisions in ethnography (Walford, 2001). This is because it shapes the depth, quality, and relevance of the data collected. There is no universal formula for selecting a site. However, the key criterion is whether a location offers sufficient richness to address the research aims (Walford, 2001). Guided by this, I relied on my long-standing encounters with Bamboi and its distinctive characteristics. The subsequent text explains my encounters with Bamboi and decision to select it for this ethnography

During my frequent journeys from the Ashanti Region to the Upper West Region, I was always captivated by the Black Volta River as the bus crossed the Bamboi Bridge (on the Trans-ECOWAS Road linking major cities such as Kumasi, Techiman, Wenchi, Bole and Wa to Burkina Faso) – a symbolic point dividing the northern and middle belts of Ghana. Within minutes of crossing the bridge, the road enters Bamboi, a village whose identity is inseparable from the river. My academic grounding in northern Ghana from 2012 onwards further shaped my interest. Years of living in the northwestern Ghana exposed me to the region's chronic water stress and the gendered dynamics of accessing communal water sources – issues that initially appeared to reflect simple male–female divides but later revealed deeper intersectional complexities.

Bamboi emerged as an ideal site because of its proximity to the Black Volta River and its central role in the village's socio-physical landscape. This was of interest to the research due to the possibility of accessing and assessing diverse lived experiences on 'formal' and 'informal' water governance strategies. Riverine settlements in Ghana such as Bamboi host layered interactions between formal and informal water governance systems, making them fertile ground for examining lived experiences at the intersection of gender, culture, and resource politics. The village's varied water-related livelihood activities including fishing, farming, trading, transportation, and food services further enhanced its suitability.

Finally, Bamboi's linguistic landscape strengthened its appeal and situated my positionality. Although Deg/Mo is the native language, Asante Twi is widely spoken. As a native Twi speaker, this fostered immersion and reduced the linguistic barriers and the risk of interpretive distortions that could arise when relying heavily on assistants for translation.

3.4 Study population, unit of analysis, sampling and sample size determination

Study population comprises the individuals whose experiences are analysed in response to research questions to give meaning to a phenomenon. It reflects the entity from which data are generated to address the social science problem under investigation (Casteel and Bridier, 2021). Salkind (2010) describes this as the *unit of analysis*, the foundation on which research claims are substantiated. Hence, they constitute the entities from whom data is generated using appropriate data collection instruments. Depending on the research problem and design, the unit of analysis may be a case, an individual, a group (Yin, 2014), or their lived experiences (Dieumegard et al., 2021; Hong and Cross Francis, 2020), with its definition shaped by the nature of the inquiry (Casteel and Bridier, 2021).

Consequently, the unit of analysis for this research included all residents of Bamboi as well as actors outside the village who influence water-related decisions, including Local Government Officials of the Bole District, the Bui Power Authority, and CWSA officials in New Longoro. Although New Longoro was not a direct study site, its proximity, Mo ethnicity, and shared social infrastructure with Bamboi as well as the oversight role of its CWSA office over the Bamboi's prospective small-town water system necessitated occasional reference to the village in this thesis. The rest of this section discusses sampling and sample size processes.

Sampling and sample size determination were guided by the need to avoid both over-sampling and under-sampling, which can waste research resources and participants' time (Sarfo et al., 2021). Whilst selecting participants in qualitative research is relatively straightforward, debates persist regarding when sampling is considered complete (Blaikie, 2018; Morse, 2000), especially given the researcher's subjective decisions about inclusion and exclusion (Porzsolt et al., 2019). This study used non-probability sampling, selecting participants based on my judgement of their knowledge of water governance in Bamboi. Non-probability sampling may occur accidentally or through targeted selection (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024; Campbell et al., 2020). Accordingly, the study employed a blend of purposive sampling, based on respondents' relevance, and accidental sampling occurring through real-time spontaneous encounters at public forums, "under-tree" conversation, water points such as taps and the BVR, and informal gatherings.

Saturation determined the point at which data collection ceased. It marks the moment when information becomes sufficiently rich to explain the phenomenon and answer the research questions (Sarfo et al., 2021; Creswell and Poth, 2016). However, as Sarfo et al. (2021) argue, saturation must be considered alongside research objectives, sampling approach, and participant

quality. Therefore, this ethnography integrated saturation, research aims, and the relevance of respondents across all phases of data collection.

3.5 Data collection methods and instruments

3.5.1 Doing fieldwork

Fieldwork is central to qualitative research designs (Aspers and Corte, 2019) and is foundational to ethnography (Hammersley, 2018). It constitutes a mode of perception through which places are directly experienced, interpreted, theorised, and rendered communicable or made ‘real’ to the researcher (Kombe et al., 2019). Within ethnography, fieldwork is an epistemic and ontological practice rather than a mechanical data-collection exercise. Thus, it entails rigorous intellectual and imaginative engagement with embodied encounters in the field, through which primary ethnographic materials are co-produced and interpreted, most commonly through participant observation (Whitehead, 2005).

Fieldwork also enables the ethnographer to internalise the spatial, temporal, and socio-cultural rhythms of a settlement, including how these patterns shift across different times of the day, week, or year to organise everyday life (Whitehead, 2005). Accordingly, I undertook ten months of continuous residence in Bamboi. This prolonged immersion made legible the seasonality of water availability and scarcity and the ways these fluctuations pattern everyday water decisions and broader configurations of water governance in the village. Figure 2 sets out the fieldwork plan that structured this ethnography.

Month	August-September	September-November	December-May	May
	<u>Field Entry</u> 28/08/22 Arrived 28/08/22 - 30/09/22 Meet GKs Recruited FA Intro 21/09/22 Visited DA	<u>Pre-Fieldwork</u> Recognisance Consent	<u>Fieldwork</u> Participant Observation Interviews Pre-Exit	Validation Exiting Village Through GKs
Year	2022	2022	2022/2023	2023

Key:

DA - District Assembly

FA - Field Assistant

GKs - Gate Keepers

 Entry

 Fieldwork

 Exit

Figure 2: Roadmap to ethnographic fieldwork in Bamboi, Bole District - Ghana

Source: Author's construct

3.5.1.1 Fieldnotes

Fieldnotes are written accounts that carry the reader into the field. They present detailed written accounts of observations made about people, places, social events, and conversations (organised and spontaneous), describing what the ethnographer experienced, looked, listened to, felt, and thought (Coles and Thomson, 2016). Crafting fieldnotes involves finding and responding to the rhythm and atmosphere and acknowledging what it is to be in a place and close to people, as well as how it feels to have a place and to be changed by the people met in that place.

Reyes (2018) argues that making fieldnotes more descriptive entails an elaboration of observations and reflections made in the field, and this is usually more balanced than personal fieldnotes. In descriptive fieldnotes, the ethnographer describes selected episode(s), person(s), place(s), or conversation(s) in considerable detail, focusing on particular aspects of the field. Descriptive fieldnotes help the ethnographer get into the scene through figurative and interesting writing, thereby making the fieldnotes more engaging (Reyes, 2018). Thus, being descriptive in writing fieldnotes transcends a mere record of raw data to being deeply imaginative and interpretive, landing readers to the field as if they were there. Whilst the ethnographer may not be able to turn everything seen and heard into text, descriptive writing can push the ether boundaries to evoke a texture, weight and clamour of the field in ways that invite participation and allow for a plurality of interpretations.



Figure 3: Field notebook of Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork (2022/23).

Fieldnote is therefore one of the instruments used to gather data to write this ethnographic piece. Mindful of ethical obligations, I clearly marked my hard-copy fieldnote book (Figure 3) as *confidential and no-access*, stored it securely, and routinely transferred entries into a protected digital field report. The fieldnotes also became a reflexive tool that shaped subsequent interviews: gaps identified in earlier entries informed follow-up conversations, allowing questioning to remain dynamic, responsive and grounded in unfolding field realities rather than predetermined scripts. Being conscious of the decolonial undertones of this research, being flexible and bending questions to suit field realities and previous responses were ways of giving research autonomy and direction to the local people and their realities.

3.5.2 Participant observation

Observation is an important data collection method in ethnography (Neuman, 2014; Whitehead, 2005; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). It is the starting point of ethnography because the ethnographer begins to observe and be observed immediately after there is an entry into the ethnographic site (Hammersley, 2018). Wacquant (2009) argued that observation is synonymous with immersion in ethnography. Participant observation is a typical methodological approach to ethnography and many anthropological and sociological studies (Kawulich, 2012; Neuman, 2014).

According to Marshall and Rossman (2014), observation is the systematic process in which events, behaviours, and artefacts of a social setting are described. Although observation is often associated with sight, in its purest form, ethnographers use all their senses, which include sight, hearing, smell, taste, and feelings (emotions/touch), to higher levels to understand the cultural environment in which they are studying and living (Whitehead, 2005). Observation also serves as a triangulation strategy to improve the credibility and validity of this study as suggested by Yin (2009). Being a participant observer in Bamboi, I was conscious of attending public events of the village's interest to continuously build and sustain trust, adequately immerse in in the village's social patterns, and gather important pointers for subsequent interviews. Public events such as funeral rites are important part of the Ghana rites of passage. In some southern Ghana ethnicities such as the Akan (especially the Asante), it is a whole economic investment (see Gedzi et al., 2020; De Witte, 2003). Joining bereaved families to mourn their deceased is considered a good gesture and often appreciated with food, drinks and a one-on-one appreciation after the funeral. Knowing this character of the Ghanaian society, I actively participated in the funeral celebration of the water priestess, who had died a few days after an interview with her.

3.5.2.1 Observation checklist

I developed an observation guide/checklist before the fieldwork. This was used to gather first-hand information on the water resources and the day-to-day lives around water access and availability within Bamboi. Data gathered with the checklist was recorded in my field notebook. Where appropriate, I sought the consent of people in any scenario I observed to snap pictures, which were subsequently stored on my University's OneDrive and standalone device.

3.5.3 In-depth interviews (IDIs) with Key Informants (KIs)

In ethnography, an interview is synonymous with face-to-face discussions between the researcher and participants on their perspectives, views, opinions and ideas on the research subject (Whitehead, 2005). Schostak (2005) argues that it would be a deception to assume that interview is a process where the researcher mines data. It is a process where there is a clash of opinions and perspectives between the interviewee and the interviewer, thus, an interview of ‘yours’, ‘ours’, ‘mine’ and worldviews (Schostak, 2005). Whilst interviews are generic description of the face-to-face interactions between the researcher and participants, an in-depth interview (IDI) is an interview technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore and understand their situated perspectives, worldviews and experiences on a particular idea, programme, or situation (Boyce and Neale, 2006). IDIs offer researchers a comprehensive picture (rather than a snapshot) of how issues or situations exist or occur in the way they do (Boyce and Neale, 2006). The primary advantage of an in-depth interview for this study was to provide flexibility and detailed information about the research subjects – “water”, “decision-making/governance”, “intersectionalities”, and “African feminisms”. IDIs in this study were used to engage water stakeholders and informants to be at ease in raising, responding and

discussing questions on the politics of participation regarding everyday water decision and governance in general.

3.5.3.1 In-depth interview/ key informant guides

Various instruments were used in the in-depth interviews. When in-depth interviews were conducted for key informants (KIs), a KI guide that had been designed prior to the fieldwork was used to guide the interviews. Different KI guides were designed based on the nature of the key informant being targeted for information. For instance, a peculiar guide was designed for the interview with internal key informants such as the village's council of elders, the Water Priests and other knowledgeable persons on water decisions in Bamboi such as oral historians in the village. Also, another KI guide was designed for informants from Government subsidiaries such as the respondents from the Planning and Engineering Departments in the Bole District Assembly and CWSA. In addition, a KI guide was designed for interviews with identified academics working on water governance in Northern Ghana. In the introductory period of this ethnography, this KI guide was used in the interview of two academics engaged in water governance for over a decade who are based at SDD-UBIDS. The interview with these academics preceded the fieldwork and guided my questioning on the field. The essence of the different interview guides was to provide a tailored interview structure that was appropriate in co-producing responses from different stakeholders who have unique experiences, interests and knowledge of the realities of the politics surrounding gender mainstreaming, intersectionalities and water governance within the Northern Ghana landscape.

3.5.4 Auxiliary data collection methods

Beyond the fieldwork, participant observation and interviews, I relied on life histories and informal conversations to understand issues deeper and eavesdrop on unplanned interviews,

respectively. Life history interviews of some personalities in Bamboi were used to understand how their life has uniquely positioned them in the decision-making spaces of the village. I conducted four life history interviews. Two were with *Naa Tiya* and her sister, known in the village as *Kasafoɔ*. These were older people with no specified leadership responsibilities in the village but were considered well-versed in the history of the village. Hence, they were held in higher esteem by most of the people I engaged. Usually, people I engaged on the history of Bamboi and water decisions would tell me: *“go and talk to Naa Tiya. She can give you accurate information about all you are asking. Her sister, Kasafoɔ, also knows a lot, but she will bore you with long conversations”*.

As a decolonial feminist ethnographer, I needed to know all that they did not want *Kasafoɔ* to bore me with. Until I had stayed in Bamboi for quite a longer period, I had assumed *Naa Tiya* was the Water Priestess due to the references made of her by many of my initial contacts, including some members of the village council of elders when I wanted to know more about the BVR and gendered relations. Her sister was also engaged on her life history to make an intersectional argument about the differential perceptions the village ascribes to old age (in Chapter Five; section 5.3.1, I discuss this).

The third life history interview was with the water priestess, *Koraa Yaa Kumah*. This history was important in understanding the uniqueness of her role and how it positions her to disrupt the problematic gazes of mainstream feminisms. Her interview was instrumental in the analysis in Chapter Seven.

The fourth life history was from a neighbour of a man in his mid-forties who is a return migrant in the village, after working at the Bui Power Authority until he had an accident. At the point of the ethnography, he was mentally challenged but was responsible for his personal upkeep, which

he eloquently delivered each day. His history was important to unpack the intersectional privileges by differently positioned men and migrants in the village. I pseudonymised him as “Matthew” in Chapter Five (5.3.7).

Aside from life histories, I engaged in various informal conversations with people in matters that I found interesting to the research subject. Since I had employed participant observation, immersing in the village meant joining in the everyday life of the village such as going to the village’s market, visiting saloons for my hair servicing, visiting friends I had made at their shops and randomly moving through the village at some times. The conversations in such everyday living were not structured as interviews, but some became important in making analytical narratives. Others were the basis for scheduling in-depth interviews.



Figure 4: A random informal conversation in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork (2022/23).

Finally, this ethnography relied primarily on the lived experiences, everyday practices, and narratives of residents of Bamboi, as well as the agencies that directly engage the village in water provision and decision-making. Given the richness and depth of data generated from the village, the Bole District Assembly (the local government authority), and the CWSA, – particularly regarding the Government of Ghana’s strategies and policies on water governance – national-level institutions that do not operate directly in Bamboi, such as the Water Resources Commission, were not interviewed for primary data. Similarly, international bodies such as the United Nations were not engaged for primary data. Nonetheless, relevant GoG policy briefs, ministerial reports on water and gender in Ghana, and key UN documents were reviewed to provide analytical and contextual grounding for the study. The perusal of the UN documents, for example, produced the opening quotation (see section 1.0). Additionally, during the write-up stage, I participated in a purposively selected focus group organised by the Water@Leeds Group to engage with the UN Special Rapporteur on Water Security. Reflections from this meeting offered valuable insights into global policy gaps and challenges in water provision and governance, which further informed the analysis presented in this thesis.

3.6 Obtaining ethical clearance and ensuring an ethical ethnography

I applied for ethical clearance from the University of Leeds Ethics Committee (Business, Environment and Social Sciences – AREA). As a result, the study adhered to the University of Leeds’ ethical standards in doing social science research. The ethical issues that were adhered to included confidentiality of the responses given, the anonymity of respondents’ identity by removing identifiers from quoted responses, informed consent by seeking verbal or non-verbal consent from targeted informants and interviewees before interviews or conversations except in public forums, respect for respondents’ welfare and respect for respondents’ representation and

responses. Except in the analysis of the life histories of the Water Priestess, Naa Tiya and her sister, Kasafo, and a description of a place from my native research assistant (see section 5.3.7), all the respondents were anonymised or pseudonymised.

In relation to respect for respondents' welfare as an ethical practice, I had planned that if a respondent was not feeling well within a scheduled period of interview or during the interview session, I would reschedule the interview and possibly support the respondent to seek medical assistance, if required and consented to. On the field, this was practicalised when I encountered an aged key informant who was grieving at the time of a scheduled interview. We (including my two research assistants) were trapped between leaving her alone or just being around her in grief, as she was alone in her thatch house. I made the decision that we will be with her as she was not comfortable when we bid her goodbye. We sat by her as she narrated her ordeal of losing close relatives, with a recent one that hit her badly. She teared up for a while and started engaging us in stories about the village's history and that of neighbouring villages. In few minutes, her countenance had changed, as she was smiling at some point. Whilst this was a good sign, I understand that grieving is a constellation of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural changes occurring in response to loss (Benner, 1979). Kübler-Ross (2014) proposes a five-stage model of grief; denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, which do not necessarily occur in a predetermined order. Thus "we go back and forth and may react to the same loss at different stages" (Avis et al., 2021). To avoid her relapsing to deep grief, we sought permission to reschedule the interview to another date. In less than a week's time, we were informed of her demise.

3.7 Planning village entry and gaining access to participants

Access in ethnographic fieldwork is always negotiated. This requires the researcher to deploy interpersonal skills including respect, empathy, and adherence to local protocols to navigate everyday interactions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Field entry is an important moment for ethnographers. It begins with an ‘outsider’ establishing legitimacy, managing first impressions, and responding to the questions, gazes, and curiosity of community members (Whitehead, 2005). This process is mediated by gatekeepers including chiefs, religious leaders, traditional priests, local authorities and others who control access to key social spaces and information (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Maintaining balanced relations with these actors is essential to avoid being entangled in existing gatekeeper rivalries while still securing their endorsement.

An ethnographer’s acceptance by the gatekeepers has a higher potential in ensuring successful ethnographic work. Hence, my initial entry into Bamboi was facilitated through the Chief’s representative and the Bamboi Palace council of elders. This council comprised male gate heads and their female counterparts (*hankoora*) across the six Mo gates (see Chapter Six), as well as respected custodians of customary knowledge such as the *Water Narrator*, whose lineage spans the Koorafon and Haritinafon gates. Although my initial plan was to enter through the Bole District Assembly a – decentralised administrative body serving populations up to 75,000 (GSS, 2021), this option was not feasible because I arrived on a weekend when the Assembly was closed. The aim of entering Bamboi through the district assembly was to have access to the contact information of the elected local government officer of Bamboi, locally referred as Assemblyman or woman (usually elected in charge of a basic unit of local governance locality such as a village, town or part of a town). This option would have eliminated the procedures and protocols that would be required in entering through traditional authorities like chiefs. However, relying on Assembly

members, who are often aligned with partisan politics (primarily NPP or NDC), risked complicating early engagements.

Instead, access was strengthened through a native of Bamboi – later one of my research assistants (also an alumnus of UDS) – who already had strong ties with key gatekeepers, including the Chief’s representative, Water Priests, and the council of elders. His presence significantly reduced the initial suspicion often directed at outsiders. Northern Ghana’s long-standing exposure to university-led field training, particularly the University for Development Studies’ Third Trimester Field Practical Programme (TTFPP), has made settlements generally welcoming to researchers. As a former UDS student who had undertaken fieldwork in Wa Municipality and Larabanga, entering a northern Ghanaian settlement did not present the same challenges faced by an “absolute outsider.”

Nevertheless, I dedicated the first month of the fieldwork to systematic introductions and deep reconnaissance. Living in Bamboi during this period enabled me to familiarise myself with local politics, power dynamics, water-use practices, and the rhythms of everyday life. Immersing myself in daily water collection, observing sources, and understanding patterns of availability provided a critical foundation for grasping the complex social and ecological dynamics shaping the research context.

3.8 Staying and researching in Bamboi

This section unpacks the processes of entering, staying and strategies of immersing within the ethnographic settlement, Bamboi.

3.8.1 Arriving at the ethnographic site – Bamboi

I travelled from Wenchi to Bamboi at 1:52 pm on Sunday, 28 August 2022, accompanied by my younger brother, who later became one of my research assistants. His involvement in the exploratory stage was intentional: he was available at the time, and travelling with him mitigated concerns around accommodation uncertainties, personal safety, and existing health challenges. His presence therefore reduced anxiety³ and proved invaluable during field entry. Beyond safety, he also provided an organic social network in Bamboi, as he had a former classmate, a Deg/Mo native, whose extended family still lived in the village. This connection offered a useful starting point for establishing initial contacts on the day of arrival. My familiarity with the Bamboi route, gained through frequent travel to the Upper West Region between 2012 and 2018, further eased the transition into the field. In the discussion that follows, “I” and “we” are used interchangeably to reflect either my solo activities or tasks undertaken with my research assistants.

We arrived in Bamboi around 2:58 pm. The initial contact arranged through my brother’s friend was unreachable, but drawing on prior knowledge of the village, I quickly located a guest house. This accommodation served as my base for six days until I was able to connect with the family of my brother’s friend, who later became my ethnographic household for the duration of fieldwork. Around the same period, Raymond – a native of Bamboi and my eventual village-based research assistant – visited me at the guest house and accompanied me to meet key members of the family and village gatekeepers. Whilst hopeful for a positive reception, I remained reflexive about the dynamics of field entry and the early observations I needed to begin documenting. Each day of interaction gradually deepened my immersion.

³ Kaplan (1992) unbundles the strategies of reducing field study anxieties.

In the first days, we encountered curious gazes, as residents seemed unsure whether we were transient travellers – given the high volume of passengers who briefly stop on the Trans-ECOWAS Road – or new entrants to the settlement. These reactions signalled the beginning of our negotiation of presence.

Working with my brother as a research assistant required guiding him to adopt ethnographic sensibilities, even though both of us were alumni of the UDS and participants of its TTFPP. This shared background eased the process, as he was already familiar with field conduct and community engagement. Significantly, my village-based research assistant was also a UDS alumnus with TTFPP experience, which facilitated alignment in our approaches to immersion.

Although he was a native and therefore accustomed to the layers of authority and everyday relations in Bamboi, I regularly reminded him of the methodological need for gradual immersion before initiating major interviews. I shared my fieldwork roadmap (Figure 2) with him, which enhanced our coordination and allowed us to navigate the field with greater flexibility and intentionality. This information sharing was important set the grounds for the village entry. The next section unpacks the village entry and immersion processes.

3.8.2 Processes of village entry and immersion

Raymond, my village-based research assistant, was my first bridge into Bamboi. He led me to the ‘caretaker’ chief and his elders, and as we approached the palace, I felt the weight of what this introduction meant, not just formally, but emotionally. This was my first moment of becoming visible to the people whose everyday lives I hoped to learn from. I knew that how I entered would shape what I could later see, hear, and understand. As I sat before the elders, I felt an instinctive need to locate myself in ways that would resonate with them. I deliberately highlighted my paternal

hometown, only a few miles from Bamboi. This was not a casual detail; I was consciously drawing on the cultural proximity between the Mo and the Bono/Akan, especially their shared practice of *enstoolment* rather than *enskinment*. In that moment, I realised how identity works as both a resource and a vulnerability in ethnographic encounters. Positioning myself as a “neighbour” rather than a total outsider softened the atmosphere; I could feel the elders’ expressions shift from polite distance to a more open curiosity.



Figure 5: With my native research assistant, waiting to meet the Council of Palace elders

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

However, even with this proximity, I found myself renegotiating expectations. Many elders assumed I had come with questionnaires or an intervention project – assumptions shaped by their long encounters with NGOs and philanthropists. Their expectations made me acutely aware of

how easily researchers are folded into broader histories of development promises. I had to gently but repeatedly clarify that I was not bringing a borehole, a well, or any tangible product. This was an academic ethnography and explaining that sometimes felt like unravelling layers of hope, disappointment, and assumptions about what “research” should deliver.

During my first month, this clarification became a form of relationship-building. It allowed me to reset expectations while also understanding how development encounters had already shaped what people imagined I was there to do. In this sense, my research started long before any formal observation – it began with listening to what people thought I represented.

As part of my familiarisation, I walked with my assistants to the BVR. That walk stays with me. The riverbank was alive: women washing clothes – some for their households, others as commercial work; young and older men (between 25 and 60 years) casting their nets; *motorking*⁴ operators hauling water in large gallons for sale. Whilst I observed these scenes, I was struck by how gender, age, labour, and social positioning were already quietly inscribed in the rhythms of the river. These early observations reminded me that intersectionality was not something I would “apply” later in analysis – it was right there in front of me, shaping who did what, who had access, and whose presence appeared ordinary or exceptional.

Those first days in Bamboi revolved around: how I was seen, how I wanted to be seen, and the delicate balance between researcher, stranger, neighbour, and woman. They formed the foundation of the ethnographic relationships that would guide the rest of my fieldwork.

⁴ A form of tricycle used for local transportation in several parts of Ghana.



Figure 6: Informal conversation with a group of commercial water contractors at the BVR

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

3.8.3 Meeting the “caretaker” Chief and the palace council of elders

Meeting the caretaker Chief and his council of elders became a routine part of my entry into Bamboi. These encounters were not formal audiences but moments of relationship-building that allowed me to ease into the social and political rhythms of the village. Although Bamboi carries the energy of an urban trading hub shaped by its position along the Trans-ECOWAS route, its residents still anchor authority in traditional structures, especially the chief, elders and older men. Maintaining regular contact with the Chief’s representative and other gatekeepers was therefore central to establishing trust and signalling respect.



Figure 7: First meeting with Bamboi's Chief's representative and the council of elders

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

Over time, these interactions grew into a warm, reciprocal relationship. The elders began to request conversations with me, and I was invited into significant cultural spaces, including the palace picture gallery (Figure 8), where portraits of past and neighbouring chiefs are displayed. These invitations signalled that I was no longer seen only as a visitor but as someone with whom they wished to share aspects of their history and identity. With this foundation of familiarity and trust, I then began scheduling formal interviews. By this point, participants clearly understood the purpose of the research, the use of the data, and had given informed consent to participate.



Figure 8: Picture gallery of the Bamboi Palace

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

3.8.4 Meeting the Bamboi hankoora (Queen mother) and her elders

As part of my introduction to the village, I met the Bamboi *hankoora* (queenmother). She had not been present during my initial meeting with the Chief's representative and elders, so the *Yaarafon* hankoora stood in for her. The *Yaarafon* is one of the key family gates in Bamboi –discussed further in Chapter Six – and is the chieftaincy gate from which male descendants assume the village's paramountcy while female descendants become hankoora.

In later conversations, the Bamboi hankoora clarified that the Yaarafon hankoora's representation was not a fixed rule but a discretionary choice determined by availability. Her proximity – living closer to the Bamboi hankoora – also made her a practical stand-in. I sought further clarity on this recurring substitution and learned that, although both the chief and the Bamboi hankoora originate from the Yaarafon, the gate independently contributes its own male and female elders to the palace council. Thus, the Yaarafon hankoora holds her own seat but temporarily assumes the Bamboi hankoora's role when formally requested.

My discussions with the Bamboi hankoora and her elders revealed the gendered structure of representation at the palace. Only one seat is formally allocated to women – the Bamboi hankoora's seat. All other female elders attend as representatives of their respective gates, paired with their male gate heads. In practice, however, during all the palace meetings I attended, only the Yaarafon hankoora was present; the rest were absent due to old age, ill health, or conflicting domestic and economic responsibilities. These roles are inherited and not easily relinquished.

Interestingly, similar constraints affected male elders, yet they had regents who represented them – unlike the women. For example, both the Yaarafon and Haritinafon (landowners' gate) were represented by regents because their actual heads were incapacitated. This reinforced the implicit hierarchy that male representation was indispensable, while female presence was optional.

This dynamic became analytically important for this study. The Yaarafon hankoora explained that when a male gate head attends a meeting, he is assumed to represent the “whole” gate because he would have already consulted the hankoora and other gate members. Thus, women's physical absence was framed as inconsequential. Moreover, most women are traders, and palace meetings are held during trading hours; attending would mean losing income, whereas their views would

still be conveyed through their male gate head. Her explanation resonates with Dikito-Wachtmeister's (2000) observation from Zimbabwe that women's participation in committee meetings is often constrained by competing livelihood responsibilities

3.8.5 Meeting the “River/Water Priest”

During the introductory phase of the fieldwork, several villagers, including the palace elders, consistently referred me to the water/river priest once I mentioned water decision-making as a core theme. Throughout the thesis, I use “water priest” and “river priest” interchangeably to describe the custodian of the BVR's customary governance. Although he represents the Koorafon gate (one of the six Mo family gates discussed in Chapter Six) on the council of elders, he had been absent during my initial palace visit, making an early visit to his residence essential. With assistance from my native research assistant, I met him in the Koorafon section of the village (each gate maintains its ancestral compound for libations and periodic sacrifices).

Our first conversation offered deep insight into his role as water priest, particularly the cosmic and supernatural stewardship of the BVR expressed through sanctifications, totemic rules, and taboos. His narratives became foundational for constructing the themes of Chapter Six and served as a memory archive of the village's metaphysical water governance.

Among the key taboos he outlined was the prohibition against fetching river water with dark or smoke-blackened containers. He also emphasised that menstruating women were barred from approaching the river; they had to wait at the riverbank for others to fetch water on their behalf. He further explained that the sanctification of the BVR is a mandatory annual rite, typically performed between April and June, to appease the river deity and seek forgiveness for “sins” –

actions that violate the rules governing access to and interaction with Nnaa Moo. Beyond this annual ritual, the priest performs intermittent sanctifications to address spontaneous violations committed by villagers or travellers crossing the BVR via the Bamboi Bridge. For example, it is forbidden for corpses or hearses to cross the river without prior libation and animal sacrifice. Families transporting deceased relatives must therefore notify either the river priest or the river narrator – a maternal Koora lineage member with historical knowledge of BVR rites – before being permitted to cross the bridge.

Later in the ethnography, however, the annual sanctification occurred in February, contradicting the earlier timeframe I had been given. This discrepancy prompted further interviews with the water priest and other custodians of the ritual. A Key Informant clarified that, ideally, the rite is performed at the start of the year to honour the river's cosmic authority and the ancestors who ensure steady water supply and sustain livelihoods, including trade. This triangulation highlighted the value of long-term ethnographic immersion and underscored how short, non-participant methods might have entirely missed such retrospective clarifications.

3.8.6 Meeting the “River/Water Narrator”

In addition, the Narrator indicated how the Bui Power Authority has affected the communal control over the BVR at their enclave. To him, the Bui Dam's operation and poor communication during the release of the floodwater from the dam make their sanctification and supernatural signal tracing on the river quite unclear. For instance, he revealed that the mob of dead fishes at the banks of the river until the Bui Dam's existence could be a site for a spontaneous sacrifice to appease the river deity of a pending calamity against the village and other external users of the river such as travellers. However, due to the operation/effects of the Bui Dam (particularly regarding release of flood water), the incidence of mob of dead fishes and other aquatic lives are difficult to be

associated with a call for spiritual sanctification or because of an unannounced spill over from the dam. Consequently, the leaders involved the river safeguarding are almost always at a crossroad on whether such a deadly ecological situation is an anthropogenic result (mainly associated with the Bui Dam) or a sign from the cosmic world; something that was hitherto a straightforward alert. This has created a state of uncertainty in their safeguarding responsibilities. To avoid this uncertainty and a potential oversight on a signal from the cosmic world, they consult the river deity from time to time on such scenes (such as mob of dead aquatic lives by the BVR banks) to confirm whether its anthropogenic or a signal of pending calamity.

The river narrator is a key oral historian and traditionalist whose intimate knowledge of Bamboi's spiritual and governance relations with the Black Volta River significantly informed Chapters Four and Six. A maternal descendant of the Koorafon⁵ and a patrilineal descendant of the Haritinafon⁶, he grew up learning from elderly custodians – many now ancestors (in Chapter Six, I have explained the value and space of an ancestor in the layers of natural resources decisions in Bamboi) – about the beliefs, values, taboos, worldviews, totems and decision-making norms through which the village governs access to, use of, and control over the BVR.

Echoing the river priest, he explained that although the river is technically “open access,” entry is governed by strict taboos. Fridays are reserved for sacrifices – animal offerings and libation that invoke the river's cosmic authority – during which residents are expected to avoid the river. However, for those who cannot afford daily purchases from private taps or do not have storage, abstaining from river access on such days is difficult, prompting some to visit the river regardless. In Chapter Four, I have discussed the potable water problems in Bamboi and how the BVR serves

⁵ The gate that oversees the direct governance and safeguarding of the BVR.

⁶ The gate that oversees the direct governance and sanctification of the land resources of Bamboi.

as a main source of water for the village. He noted that pollution and taboo violations were rare in earlier periods, before the influence of Christianity and increasing urbanisation diluted the authority previously ascribed to the river's spiritual governance.

In describing women's roles in safeguarding the BVR, he highlighted the functions of Koora Yaa Kumah, the river priestess responsible for preparing the grains used in the annual sanctification, and Naa Tiya, an elderly Koorafon woman deeply committed to protecting the river. In Chapter Seven, Koora Yaa Kumah and Naa Tiya in detail. Beyond these individuals, he emphasised collective female participation in annual sanctification rituals – marked by dancing, cooking, and food offerings to the river deity. Although food preparation is gendered as women's work, he stressed that both men and women are expected to participate in the ritual offerings, subtly challenging local gendered assumptions.

He added that, until the recent commercialisation of river water via tricycles (motorking), women were the primary daily users of the river for fetching water and laundering. Their frequent presence meant they were most likely to witness unusual appearances such as figures or totems perceived as manifestations of the river deity signalling the need for spiritual intervention.

He expressed the belief that the BVR is “feminine,” describing its calm character and its historical “protection” of villagers from drowning. However, he acknowledged that drownings have occurred and attributed changing river behaviour partly to the Bui Dam, which has altered flow volumes and undermined what he understood as the river's protective disposition. Still, he regarded the river as nurturing – providing water, food, and sustaining the local economy. To him, “[...] mothers do that”. Although he first described the river as feminine, he later explained that it can manifest as a child, woman or man, or appear non-physically through dreams and visions.

This contradiction underscores that gender, for the village, is not a fixed biological category but a fluid social construction attached to roles, behaviour and symbolic meaning.

He explained that beyond the annual rituals, most spontaneous sanctifications are triggered by women's reports of unusual sightings – strange figures, sudden appearances of crocodiles or snakes, or other anomalies at the riverbank. Whilst these reports intrigued me, the study could not determine whether such encounters arise from supernatural sensitivity or are simply random experiences accessible to anyone.

Finally, he described how the Bui Dam has complicated communal spiritual governance. Previously, events such as unexplained masses of dead fish were read as clear spiritual warnings requiring immediate rituals. Today, similar events may result from dam-induced disturbances, leaving river custodians unsure whether to treat them as ecological accidents or cosmic signals. This ambiguity has created uncertainty in safeguarding practices, often compelling custodians to consult the river deity repeatedly to avoid misreading potentially significant signs. It is within this informal and formal water governance disconnections that I problematised IWRM led governance.

3.9 Negotiating power relations in decolonial feminist ethnography

This section is a reflection on how I navigated power relations in the field – an essential element of decolonial feminist ethnography (Manning, 2021). Power in ethnographic encounters is fluid and continually negotiated (Rembulan et al., 2020), shaping how researchers and participants engage across divergent worldviews, knowledges, and lived experiences. Understanding these relational dynamics in Bamboi was therefore central to my immersion. Although immersion is foundational at the outset of any ethnography, it remains a continuous process through which trust, accuracy, and ethical reflexivity are sustained (Harrington, 2015).

Positioned as a young Akan/Asante woman from Kumasi, with the added layers of higher education and affiliation with a Western university, I entered the field aware that these intersecting identities formed the initial lens through which settlement might perceive me. Recognising this, I paid close attention to how age, indigeneity, and social belonging structured interactions among young people, elders, and newcomers in Bamboi. Beginning with the identity categories most salient at the village level allowed me to situate myself meaningfully within the social landscape.

A central feature of power negotiation in Bamboi concerned the relationship between young people and elders. Respect is not merely a social virtue but a performative practice: young people demonstrate it by bending to greet adults, particularly those with authority such as the Chief and the council of elders. Conversations with residents revealed that this embodied practice is deeply valued. Respect also takes the form of periodic visits to influential elders, acts that function as acknowledgements of their status. Although not compulsory, such visits can quietly shape future opportunities, including political endorsement for positions such as assembly person or unit committee member.

My conversation with a young male Assembly member from New Longoro illustrated this dynamic vividly. His account showed that cultivating purposeful relationships with elders of influence was not only socially prudent but strategically necessary for political and communal legitimacy. Importantly, these practices do not eclipse other social markers including education, literacy, networks, charisma, or perceived attractiveness, which also intersect to shape power and participation. These broader dynamics are further unpacked in Chapter Five.

3.10 Exploring field challenges

This section outlines the challenges that emerged before, during, and after fieldwork. The pre-field phase revealed gaps in planning and preparation, while on-field challenges were real-time issues that stemmed from navigating language barriers, interpretation complexities, positionality, and everyday human relations. The post-field phase brought its own difficulties, particularly during data analysis, writing, and maintaining relationships established in the field.

3.10.1 Intersectional challenges and language barriers

The intersectional challenges I encountered on the field stemmed from the interplay of my biological and socio-cultural identities. A persistent barrier was my inability to access certain sacred spaces associated with libation and river or land sanctification: *“they are mainly reserved for (some) men”*, one Mo native gate head would tell me. In Bamboi’s cosmology, these spaces are restricted to specific men, not because I was an outsider, but because I was a woman. This exclusion is a normalised everyday boundary for all women in the village; however, it posed a methodological constraint for me as a participant observer seeking to understand the spiritual logics that underpin water stewardship. A male researcher would likely have been granted access for academic purposes. The tension between gendered norms and ethnographic demands became one of the earliest indications of how power, knowledge, and cosmology intersect in the field.

Gendered expectations extended beyond sacred spaces into everyday domestic life. In Bamboi, femininity is tightly linked to tasks such as water fetching, storage, cleaning, and cooking – roles not culturally expected of adult men. When my male research assistants supported me with these tasks, their actions were perceived as “non-conforming” by my neighbours. They contested the assistance through facial expressions and subtle comments such as, *“eiiii, w’adane mmarima mmaa”*, literally, “eiiii [expression of surprise/contention] you have turned males into females”.

These perceptions made daily living a negotiation between cultural conformity and the practicalities of conducting research.

Beyond gender, my layered identity – what I describe as *insider-outsider-inside* – also shaped access. I was an insider as a Ghanaian, an outsider as a non-Mo and non-resident, and an “inside” observer through my decolonial feminist ethnographic stance. These identity layers created a complex fiction of belonging and non-belonging. Only sustained presence gradually softened the boundaries of belonging, although tensions remained. For instance, at a village forum on the potential impacts of future gold mining along the BVR (I have detailed this in Chapters Five), organisers initially assured me the discussions would be held in Twi for my benefit. However, at critical moments, conversations shifted deliberately into Mo: “*so that you would not understand*”, one Key Informant would say. Guided by decolonial ethics and aware of my own linguistic privilege as a speaker of a dominant national language (Twi), I refrained from demanding interpretations. This was one moment where my sensory instincts as an ethnographer collided with my commitment to honouring local communicative sovereignty.

Language further shaped the research process. Whilst many participants engaged me comfortably in Twi, interviews conducted solely in Deg/Mo required mediation by my research assistant. This limited my ability to pursue spontaneous follow-up questions or to interpret non-verbal cues that are essential in qualitative research. Interpretation was additionally constrained by the assistant’s availability and workload, which made timely analysis difficult. Nonetheless, immersion in everyday village interactions gradually enabled me to develop a basic understanding of commonly used Mo terms which were significant in the research such as *anni* (water) and *han* (female). This understanding allowed me to follow the flow of some conversations before translation. These

linguistic gains, though modest, became an important part of navigating the multilingual terrain of Bamboi.

3.10.2 Navigating ethnography, ethics and ethical approval boundaries

Obtaining ethical approval was a formal requirement at the University of Leeds; however, the realities of fieldwork quickly tested several of its assumptions. Confidentiality proved particularly challenging. Because my interview guide evolved through daily reflection, key informants often referred me to others – some of whom wanted to know what previous participants had said. Upholding confidentiality meant refusing to disclose any information, yet these refusals were sometimes misinterpreted as distrust. I had to continually negotiate this tension, reiterating the ethical commitments that protected all participants equally. Over time, this consistency strengthened trust and encouraged respondents to share sensitive insights, confident that their voices and identities were secure.

A second ethical dilemma emerged at the intersection of local cosmologies and my own knowledge of potable water risks. As documented in Chapter Six (Figure 43), a young woman drank directly from the BVR, describing the water in the river as “pure” because of its spiritual protection. Meanwhile, the UNICEF and WHO (2017) projected that there are 829,000 annual mortalities caused by waterborne diarrhoea. Whilst her explanation aligned with the village’s cosmological framing of the river, my awareness of waterborne disease prevalence – particularly downstream in the Volta Basin – created a moral tension between ethnographic non-interference and potential harm. Navigating this boundary required careful judgment. Rather than directly challenging her belief, I engaged the Chief’s Representative to encourage broader community reflection on the

health risks of drinking untreated river water. This approach allowed me to honour local worldviews whilst addressing a potentially life-threatening practice.

3.10.3 Localising and communicating research objectives

Localising the research objectives took time. As indicated in the fieldwork roadmap (Figure 2), the first month of the ethnography focused on familiarising myself with the village and the wider structures shaping water decisions. During introductory meetings – such as my first visit to the palace – I outlined the study’s purpose. However, Bamboi’s long history of NGO presence, including organisations like the Zakat Foundation, made it difficult for residents to distinguish this research from the “hand-out” model typical of many NGO interventions in Ghana. The study was initially perceived as action-oriented work that would deliver tangible benefits – such as a water system – rather than an academic exercise in collaborative knowledge production. This assumption extended beyond the first month and required continual clarification of the research objectives. With time, expectations of material outcomes diminished, easing engagement with participants.

Also, localising the concept of “gender” proved challenging and prolonged the process. As Oyewumi (1997) argues, Eurocentric gender categories often do not translate neatly into many African contexts, and this was evident in Bamboi. During initial conversations, “gender” was repeatedly interpreted as *han* (female), rather than as the social constructions and expectations associated with being *han* (female) or *ndam* (male). This narrow interpretation obscured the relational dimensions of gender central to the study, requiring consistent explanation before the research ideas were fully understood.

3.10.4 Managing post-field relationships and bereavement of key participants

Post-field relationships are integral to ethnographic practice, ensuring that participants do not feel “used and abandoned,” as often occurs in more extractive research designs. Although I was intentional about honouring these relationships, maintaining regular communication became difficult once analysis and thesis writing began. This tension produced a persistent “guilt-trap” whenever I could not return calls or messages from participants wishing to keep in touch. I eventually explained my writing schedule and reassured them that completion of the thesis would allow more time for conversation, an explanation many warmly accepted.

A more unexpected challenge was the loss of several key participants during and after fieldwork. In earlier, shorter field projects experiences, I had never encountered the death of respondents and therefore had not anticipated the emotional weight such events would carry. In this ethnography, however, it became a recurring reality. Within a week of our first engagement, the River Priestess passed away while I was still in Bamboi. After leaving the field, I received news of the deaths of the Water Narrator (a Key Informant and friend), and later, Naa Tiya, her sister Kasafo (who I discuss in Chapter Seven) and Opanin Kwame Kapre, the father of my host household. Although most were elderly, the Water Narrator was younger, vibrant, and deeply invested in sharing the village’s stories with me. Revisiting our conversations during the writing stage was therefore both moving and emotionally demanding.

3.10.5 Everyday living challenges

Other living conditions, particularly the limited availability of decent sanitary facilities in both households and public spaces, posed a consistent challenge in Bamboi. This was part of my daily reality throughout fieldwork. Although staying in a guesthouse could have eased these difficulties,

I deliberately chose to live within the everyday environments of residents to lessen the effects of my ‘outsider-inside’ positionality. This decision coincided with my recent recovery from typhoid fever, which heightened my physical vulnerability. Combined with the anxiety of navigating cosmological narratives and supernatural worldviews surrounding the BVR, everyday life required constant adjustment and resilience.

3.11 Exiting Bamboi

This section outlines the processes involved in exiting the village. “Exit” here refers to withdrawing my physical presence and not ending my relationships with Bamboi. Sustained interaction remained essential for ensuring that participants were recognised as co-producers of knowledge throughout the research process rather than mere sources of data. My exit unfolded through three interconnected actions.

The first involved re-engaging village elders and leaders. By April 2023, the major themes of the ethnography had been fully developed through participant observation and interviews. To ensure accuracy and contextual fidelity, I returned to the elders with a summary of my findings. This validation meeting sparked further conversations that clarified earlier insights and illuminated the rationales behind several village practices. Unexpectedly, it also inspired the elders to initiate a collective effort to document Bamboi’s history for future generations, a significant outcome of this decolonial ethnography, demonstrating how ongoing engagement can stimulate internal processes of knowledge reclamation.

The second action entailed revisiting individual respondents in their homes to thank them and share the summary of the findings. These encounters were warmly received and opened additional space for participants to expand, challenge, or refine aspects of the analysis. Framing this as part of a

decolonial feminist methodology, I viewed these moments as opportunities for respondents to assert ownership over both the research process and its interpretations.

The final exit action was an open village forum. This gathering enabled me to present the overall findings to the wider village, formally announce my departure, and make space for anyone who wished to share additional intersectional experiences. During this forum, palace elders and youth leaders symbolically honoured me and my non-native assistant with handwoven *fugu* (smock) garments. In return, I donated three second-hand computers to the basic schools, delivered through the village gatekeeper and teachers. Beyond its ceremonial function, the forum became another moment of collective reflection, reinforcing the value of such assemblies in nurturing village cohesion.

On the evening of 4 May 2023, I made personal rounds to thank key informants and my host household for their care and support. The following afternoon, at approximately 1:37 p.m. on 5 May 2023, my brother (who also served as my research assistant) and I boarded a 15-seater yellow minibus from Bamboi's village centre to Techiman (the capital of Bono East Region). This marked my physical exit from the village.

3.12 Data management

Throughout the data collection, I obtained participants' consent to audio-record interviews on a standalone device, after which each recording was transcribed into my fieldnote book and transferred into the main field-report document stored on my University of Leeds OneDrive. A dedicated folder titled *Field Data* housed all materials. Interviews conducted in Deg/Mo or Twi were transcribed verbatim into English with support from my field assistant. Both the English transcripts and the original-language recordings were retained on OneDrive to safeguard the

contextual meanings embedded in local expressions that risk being diluted through translation. In line with the decolonial orientation of this study, I preserved selected quotations in their original languages, primarily Twi, to maintain “deeper” and “localised” meanings. The use of Twi also reflects my own linguistic competency and limitations, as I am not literate in Deg/Mo. However, only six of the forty-three in-depth interviews were conducted in Deg/Mo; the majority used Twi, with a few in English.

Photographs and other field materials were also stored on OneDrive to ensure secure and ethical data management. However, given the unreliable internet connectivity in Bamboi, I introduced an external hard-drive backup as an additional protective measure to prevent data loss which is an essential consideration in safeguarding participants’ contributions. Prior to fieldwork, my ethical application to AREA specified that any third-party use of the data must comply with the principles of confidentiality, informed consent, protection of participants, and anonymity (BSA, 2017).

3.13 Data processing and discussions

Data analysis in ethnography is inherently iterative, unfolding alongside data generation and continuing beyond fieldwork. Although formal analysis begins after leaving the field (Mullick et al., 2013), it draws on the entire corpus of material to identify patterns and relationships. This process involves systematically recording and organising data, producing written transcripts of interviews and conversations, and interpreting these materials to trace thematic interconnections across participants’ accounts.

In this study, analysis followed several steps. Audio recordings were replayed, handwritten into a field notebook, and later typed into a Word document. The typed version was cleaned to remove unintended background conversations and incidental sounds captured during interviews. I also

edited out unintentional repetitions and corrected grammatical inconsistencies to ensure that meanings were conveyed accurately. The cleaned text was then transcribed verbatim, including translation of interviews originally conducted in Deg/Mo or Asante Twi into English to prepare the data for thematic categorisation and deeper analysis. Once transcribed, the material was organised into themes and categories aligned with the research questions, enabling the identification of patterns, convergences, and divergences across narratives. Manual coding then guided the construction of the analytical chapters.

Respondents were subsequently anonymised and grouped into four analytic categories. Village key informants were anonymised as KII (1 to nth). External key informants, primarily government staff involved in water governance in Bamboi, New Longoro, or the Bole District Assembly, were labelled Government staff (1 to nth). Individuals who participated in in-depth interviews following informal conversations were anonymised as Village respondents (VR 1 to nth). Participants involved in group informal discussions were identified as Participant (A to nth), where (nth) represents the last number counted in each quoted cohort. Table 3 summarises how these processes supported the extraction and organisation of research themes in relation to the study's overarching questions.

Table 3: Field data categorisation and analysis

Research questions	Main themes/Chapter formation	Sampled quotations
What are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how do they manifest in Bamboi?	Chapter Four: Situating the waterscape of Bamboi within that of Ghana.	"For a village like Bamboi with that kind of population, they require more than boreholes [...] a Small-Town Water System is what the village requires but there are a lot of similar priorities on our table" (Government staff 1)
Who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi?	Chapter Five: Intersectionalities of inclusion and exclusion within the social structure of Bamboi and its manifestation in water decision-making of the village.	"As for water related matters, go and ask <i>Mokooro</i> [the River Priest]" (Palace elder).
How do local and customary institutions interact with formal water governance institutions?	Chapter Six: Layers of localised worldviews and cosmic relations of the waters of Bamboi and their interactions with the modern-centred paradigms of the Government of Ghana.	"Water comes from the Creator [...] it is our actions that contaminate the water bodies [...] you know that there are spirits controlling natural resources which we cannot see. So, if we do not reconcile with the river every time and thank the spirit within it for supplying us water and all many connecting benefits many people derive from

		the river, it can affect farm cultivation and yields [...] <i>se edi kɔm na ebeba</i> ." (Literally, it will cause/bring hunger). (KII 3).
How are local and customary institutions gendered?	Chapter Seven: The African feminist and feminist political ecology of Bamboi water decisions.	"<i>Nsuo no ye obaa (tan)</i>"[...] (Literally, the river is female/"mother-hood"). It is a mother because it provides for many people in Bamboi. Even if you do not have any big capital, just carry (sachets) water and stand by the rest stop area, you will have your daily bread. How could that be possible without the river?" (KII 2). "<i>Nsuo no sikan wɔ yen fie. Kwabena Fre na ekuta sikan no. Nanso, deɛ ɔbeyɛ biara, ɔne me susu ho ansa. Nnye yareɛ a, efiada biara me ne wɔn na ekɔ yi apaeɛ</i> " (Literally, our gate [<i>Koorafon</i>] is the custodian of the staff of the Water Priesthood. It is <i>Kwabena Fre</i> [the River Priest], that holds the staff now. However, whatever he does related to safeguarding the river, he discusses with me before taking a decision. For ill health, I used to join the Friday purifications (libations) at the river" (KII 6).

Source: Author's construct.

3.14 Data presentation

Data presentation is a core component of ethnography (Murchison, 2010; Brewer, 2000), showing the immediate and situated results of field engagement. In decolonial ethnography, it becomes even more critical, as it must balance the researcher's interpretive subjectivity with the lived realities of the settlement being represented (Manning, 2018). Accordingly, the material gathered from Bamboi has been carefully unpacked and presented across Chapters Four to Seven through quoted narratives, stories, summaries, tables, maps, and figures.

Where translation risked distorting meaning, I retained original phrases in Asante Twi and Mo. Although this may limit accessibility for non-Twi and non-Mo speakers, each quotation is immediately followed by a literal English rendering. This decision reflects not linguistic inadequacy but an awareness that direct translation often strips narratives of the deeper cultural nuances they carry. The next section sets the context for understanding water governance in Bamboi.

3.15 Context setting: Bamboi within the Bole District Assembly

This section provides a concise overview of Bamboi as the study area; Chapter Four offers a fuller exposition. Bamboi's most defining geographical feature is its location along the Black Volta River, a major component of the Volta River System, which contributes approximately 70% of Ghana's national drainage network, compared with the Southwestern (22%) and Coastal (8%) systems.

Bamboi is a predominantly agricultural, fishing and commercial settlement situated within the Bole District in the western part of Ghana's Savannah Region. The district lies between latitudes 8°10.5'-09' and longitudes 1.50E-2.45W, sharing borders with Sawla-Tuna-Kalba District (north), Côte d'Ivoire via the BVR (west), West Gonja District (east), and Kintampo and Wenchi Municipalities in the Bono East and Bono Regions (south) (GSS, 2021). With a population of 118,500, the district's sex ratio is 51.7% male and 48.3% female (Abdulai and Husein, 2024), which reverses the national pattern of female majority (GSS, 2021). Ethnic groups in the area include the Gonja, Vagla, Brifor, Safalba, Mo, Dagaaba, Choribas and Pantras (GSS, 2021), with the Mo as the indigenous landholders in Bamboi.

Ecologically, the district falls within the savannah woodland zone, characterised by sheanut, dawadawa, teak, kapok and mango trees (Abebrese et al., 2022). Shea production is an important livelihood activity for rural women across northern Ghana (Ingram et al., 2015). Because shea harvesting is partly open-access (Ingram et al., 2015), it is often a good source of main livelihood or alternative livelihood, supplementing farming, for a lot of people living in rural northern Ghana. Meanwhile, sheabutter production requires substantial quantities of water, hence, water availability becomes central to everyday production and gendered labour in the area. The next paragraph unbundles the social characteristic of Bamboi.

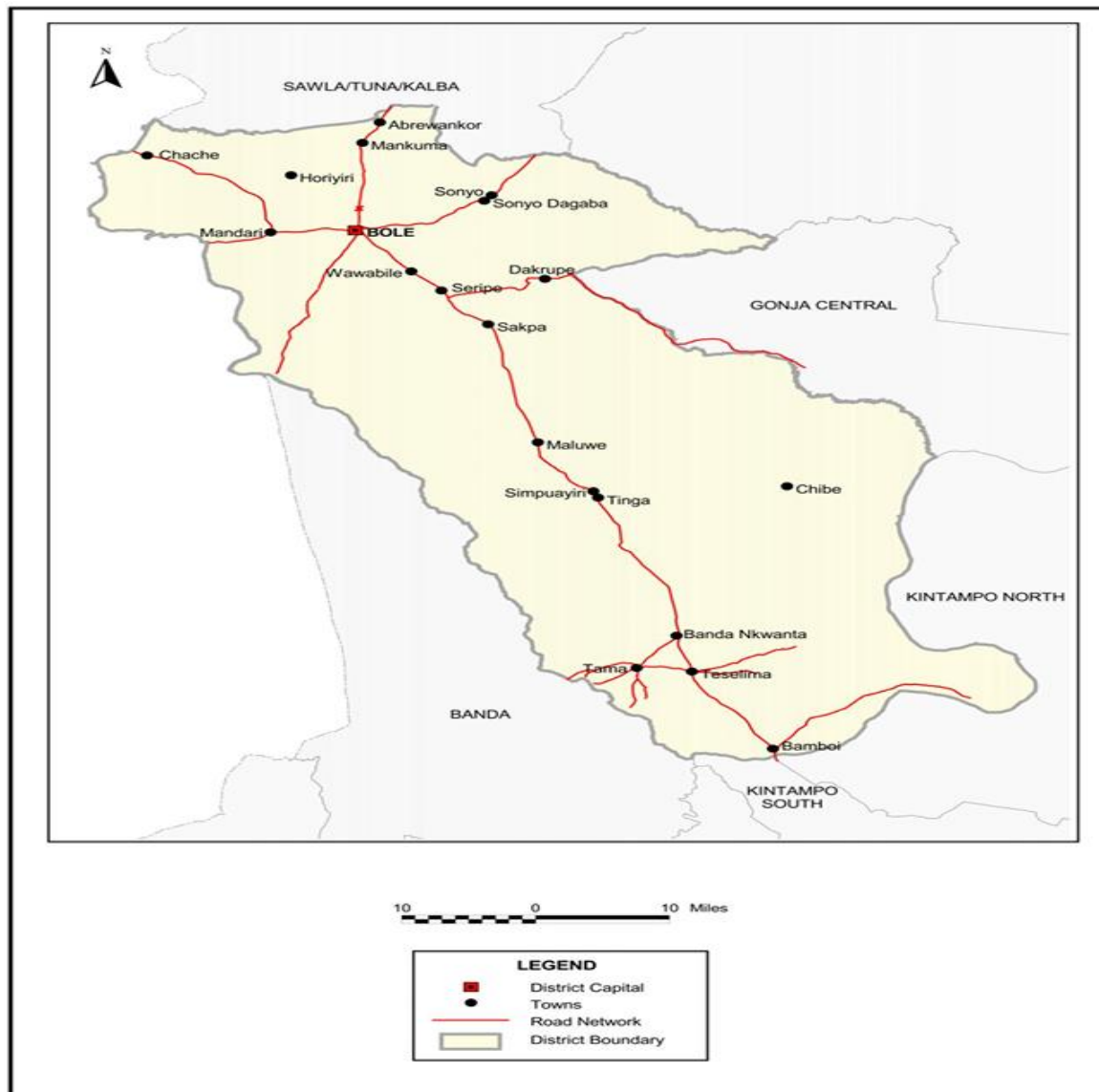


Figure 9: Map of Bole District, showing its towns and villages including Bamboi

Source: GSS, 2010.

Bamboi's settlement is a collection of many Ghanaian ethnicities, among which are predominated by the *Mo*, *Batorr*, *Akan*, *Vagla*, and *Dagaaba*. The *Fulbe*, which is a non-Ghanaian ethnicity, has presently increased in population in the village; a phenomenon that some of the Bamboi village elders could account since the 1990s. The *Mo* possesses the autochthonous rights to the land (through the *Haritinafon*), water (through the *Koorafon*), and chieftaincy (through the *Yaarafon*)

resources of the settlement. The Haritinafon, Koorafon, Yaarafon, *Vonboi* (responsible for conflict resolution in the village), *Suurafon* (pseudo linguistic gate), and *Jaagafon* (also residents of *Bampewa*, a village that is five miles at the East of Bamboi) are the major family gates that embody the Mo ethnicity in Bamboi, also referred to as the *North Mo Traditional Authority*⁷.

Two foundational features shape Bamboi's settlement history. The first is the migration of Mo ancestors' southwards from present-day Sissala in the northwestern Ghana, after an intra-ethnic conflict. The second is the village's long-standing relationship with the BVR, whose hydrology – shape, flow and volume (Mul et al., 2015) – anchors local economic, environmental and socio-political life. These trajectories mirror settlement histories across Ghana (Lentz, 2006; Gocking, 2005; Tsikata and Seini, 2004). In Chapter Four, I will elaborate Bamboi's position in the BVR enclave. The rest of this section briefly introduces water governance in Bamboi.

Surface and groundwater sources support multiple livelihood uses – drinking, agriculture, and small-scale industry in Bamboi. Whilst the BVR remains largely open-access, potable water supply (mechanised boreholes, pipes) depends on state action, implemented through local government structures. In Bamboi, the Bole District Assembly – particularly the Departments of Planning and Works – oversees potable water provision in line with Ghana's commitment to SDG 6 and the IWRM framework. As Chapter Five shows, district capacity falls below CWSA allocation standards, leaving residents dependent on individual, philanthropic and NGO interventions. The Zakat Foundation is a major provider of boreholes and related infrastructure in the village.

⁷ The other part of the *Mo* ethnicity is the *South Mo* which is made up of the *Mo* villages south of Bamboi/the Black Volta River. The capital town of the *South Mo* authority is *Kintampo*, which is located at the Bono East Region of Ghana.

In line with Ghana’s decentralisation policy, WATSAN Committees are established to encourage local ownership of rural water systems. Their formation is guided by gender quotas: the Affirmative Action–Gender Equality Act (2024)⁸ mandates 30% female membership in public decision-making platforms, including WATSAN leadership, aligning with IWRM’s gender mainstreaming expectations and SDG 5. Meanwhile, as Chapter Five demonstrates, these numeric targets obscure the intersectional realities shaping participation and authority in practice.

The governance of surface water, particularly the BVR, is the formal mandate of the Bui Power Authority (BPA). However, an older, indigenous governance system rooted in Mo cosmological worldviews continues to regulate spiritual, cultural and socio-ecological stewardship. Chapters Five to Seven detail how this autochthonous system, including ritual sanctification, taboos and totemic prohibitions remains effective despite its invisibility within IWRM structures.

3.15.1 The context of water governance in Bamboi

This section expands the water governance framework of Bamboi, clarifying who makes decisions, from where, and on what authority, and it delineates how formal service-provision systems (district, national agencies, and NGO projects) intertwine with informal/customary institutions (palace council, gate elders, water/river priesthood), producing a bricolage of arrangements through which “the many waters of Bamboi” are actually governed.

As discussed earlier in Chapter Two, water governance in Ghana operates through formal and neoliberal paradigms which are usually informed by the SDGs (and IWRM) frameworks. The institutional frameworks that shape water governance in the country operates on three levels:

⁸ Affirmative Action- Gender Equality Act, 2024: <https://www.purc.com.gh/attachment/735270-20241129071158.pdf>

national, MMDAs and village/settlement levels. Whilst the national frameworks are usually centralised and operate at strategic and high-level policy framing, the MMDAs and village/settlement agencies operate at implementation levels with direct interface to local settings and users. The national frameworks include the MWRWH which is responsible for the overall sector policy/strategy drive; the Water Resources Commission drives resource regulation and IWRM guidelines; Hydrological Services Department functions through hydrological monitoring and early warning; Ghana Water Company Limited focus on administrative and technical management of urban water; and Community Water and Sanitation Agency has oversight on rural and small town water management. These national agencies do not have day-to-day presence in Bamboi but interact with the village through the Bole District Assembly.

At the MMDAs level, the Bole District Assembly acts as the primary formal implementation agency that interface and interpret national guidance (SDGs/IWRM) into local plans, projects and oversight. The Assembly coordinates with CWSA for small-town water systems, convenes local committees such as the WATSAN, and channels donor/NGO projects at settlements that are within its administrative jurisdiction. However, the assembly operates largely from the district capital which is located at Bole and not physically embedded in Bamboi on a day-to-day basis except through Assembly persons and Unit Committee members (elected, decentralised offices).

At the village level, governance of water in Bamboi emanates from two angles: through the formally constituted committees that are directly enacted through the formal and neoliberal framings of the central government such as the WATSAN Committee; and the customary/localised institutions that are rooted in the cosmological worldview of the village such as the Water Priesthood of the Koora family gate. The WATSAN Committee is usually a five-member committee that is a formally constituted framework which is supposed to drive rural water

governance across small settlements such as Bamboi in Ghana. In practice, it is present in the village but weak in functionality and overshadowed by other locally constituted bodies such as the Development Committee (DC). The DC is a locally constituted hybrid committee (not an IWRM requirement) that has, in practice, more influence than the WATSAN in Bamboi over priorities, repairs, negotiations (for example, with miners on the BVR at Bamboi), and the social allocation of benefits. Membership tends to be elite/educated, not always representative, and often male-dominated. In Chapter Five, I discuss the DC in detail.

The official guidance in the constitution of the five-member WATSAN is at least the inclusion of two females (CWSA et al., 2010), which translates into a 40-percentage female quota. This quota often meets numeric guidance in the IWRM framework but rarely translates into solving water problems. This is because water governance in Bamboi does not reside in the WATSAN Committee. The gendered aspects of the cosmological safeguarding of the BVR rests with the Koora Yaa Kumah, whose constitution is derived from kinship and not formal.

The informal/localised frameworks in Bamboi emanate from the cosmological worldview of the village. This worldview situates that all natural resources are gifts of nature from “Korowii” (God) with inherent supernatural abilities that could reciprocate positive and negative actions in unequal measures. The Koora fon/family (Water/River gate) and the Water Priest/Priestess (Mokooro/Koora Yaa Kumah) are the localised custodians of the BVR, whose authority derives from cosmological stewardship, including ritual sanctifications, sanctions, tabooing and totemism. These actors exercise safeguarding power over the WATSAN of the village, even when unrecognised by formal frameworks of the central government. A snapshot of the water governance of Bamboi reveals an overwhelming drive by localised/customary institutions and hybrid village committees (such as the DC) whilst the formal frameworks are intermittent, distant,

and project-bound with a weak village-based WATSAN. The rest of this section sets the context of water provision in Bamboi.

Bamboi draws water from a portfolio of sources including natural and man-made sources. The natural sources in Bamboi are mainly rainfall and surface water (such as the BVR in periods of scarcity or for specific uses) whilst the man-made sources such as mechanised and handpump boreholes and individual storages are generated from a combination of infrastructure avenues such as the state, NGOs and private provisions. The state-provided infrastructure is facilitated through the Bole District Assembly (in accordance with the CWSA standards) and occasional donor-funded and central government projects. NGOs supplement state incapacity by funding and constructing boreholes and maintenance works. The Zakat Foundation is presently the dominant faith-based philanthropic actor which is key in providing sources of drinking water such as boreholes and other infrastructure support, including the ultra-modern Bamboi Community centre for the village. The private sources are usually constructed by individuals for household uses or vendor-based, to bridge the state's failure.

The ethnography has shown that there is infrastructure unreliability and population appropriate infrastructure gaps due to multiple non-functional boreholes, irregular maintenance capacities, and maintenance reliance on ad hoc negotiations (such as user-fees, favours, mining royalties, or personal ties to influential figures). As a result, breakdowns push users back to the BVR and other unpotable/unwholesome sources or private vendors.

This section sets the context for the rest of the analytical chapters in the following ways: Chapter Four (The waterscape of Ghana and Bamboi) provides the in-depth overview of Ghana's waterscape. Chapter Five (Everyday institutions and intersectional experiences) introduces the operative weaknesses of formal frameworks and committees such as the WATSAN against the

dominant DC and customary authority. The Chapter deconstruct these patterns through the axes of intersectional experiences of exclusion and inclusion. The discussions are moved forward in Chapter Six (Localised worldviews and stewardship layers) to clarify why cosmological safeguarding persists and remains effective in certain domains, despite being administratively invisible to the IWRM and its operationalisation in Ghana. Chapter Seven (An African Feminist Political Ecology of water governance) draws on African feminisms and FPE to decentre the overdwelling on simplistic gender assumptions (which is rooted in westernisation and the IWRM policy narrative) to unpack the intersectional and spiritual geographies that govern voice, gender fluidity and governance in Bamboi.

3.16 Conclusion of the chapter

In this chapter, I have explained the methods I used to gather data for this thesis. The study adopted a decolonial feminist ethnography that highlighted the various methods such as sampling, data collection instruments, village entry, living in the village, and exit of the village. Whilst I had engaged Bamboi in different ways as a regularly traveller on the Trans-ECOWAS Road that connects the village to other parts of northern Ghana, this ethnography was the first study I had done in Bamboi. I have explained the opportunities and challenges that I encountered on the field and how I navigated the various access protocols in the village, especially from my paternal ethnicity, *Bono*.

The content of this chapter is a reflective material for first time ethnographers to reflect on the different dynamics of their positionalities and how that can co-constitute their data collection practices with respect to access to spaces considered sacred and gendered. Beyond the fieldwork,

I have unpacked how field relationships and power dynamics of an ethnography are unending and dynamic; hence, I provide insights to managing post-field relationship with research respondents in ways that conform with a collaborative storytelling and not subjects of data collection, a necessity in decolonial methodology.

Building on the methodological approach and fieldwork processes described in Chapter Three, Chapter Four presents the first empirical analysis. It situates Bamboi within the broader waterscape of Ghana, showing how historical, political, ecological, and infrastructural dynamics shape the village's relationship with the Black Volta River and contemporary water governance structures.

CHAPTER FOUR

4 The nature of the waterscape of the Black Volta River — “Nnaa Moo” and the framing of Bamboi

4.0 Introduction

This chapter draws on the waterscape literature introduced in Chapter Two to unpack the waterscape of Ghana, within which the Black Volta River is situated. Waterscape, as conceptualised by Höllermann and Evers (2020), Karpouzoglou and Vij (2017) and Swyngedouw (2000), interrogates the intersecting relationships between human actions and the beliefs, value systems, norms, interests, practices, and physical attributes that shape water systems. Building on this premise, the chapter responds directly to the first research question: “What are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana, and how do they manifest in Bamboi?” By engaging the broader waterscape of Ghana, the chapter provides the contextual grounding necessary to understand the socio-ecological interactions that underpin water governance nationally, and how the specific dynamics of the BVR – situated within this wider hydro-social field – shape everyday life in Bamboi.

In doing so, the chapter lays the foundation for analysing how different categories of people – both males and females – are positioned along the village’s water decision-making continuum. It also reveals the multiple and often competing interests that emerge between state and local actors in relation to Ghana’s water resources, particularly regarding damming activities within the Volta River Basin for hydroelectric power generation. Such large-scale infrastructural interventions continually reshape the politics, priorities, and interactions between local residents and their water

sources across parts of the basin. It is within this broader framing that the subsequent analytical chapters are situated.

4.1 Premising the waterscape of Bamboi

The subsequent sections of this chapter are structured as follows. The chapter first discusses the various river systems in Ghana and their significance to the country. The discussion then narrows to the Volta River System because of its direct and substantial connection to the BVR, which constitutes the primary water source for Bamboi, the ethnographic setting. The Volta River System is the “mother” of several major rivers in Ghana, including the BVR, along whose bank Bamboi’s human settlement is located.

The chapter also highlights the politics and power that successive Governments of Ghana have exercised in attempts to control or “capture” water resources to satisfy the country’s modern demand for hydroelectric power. This focus on state-led water politics is especially important for understanding the waterscape of the BVR within the Bamboi catchment, given the construction of the Bui Dam on the river’s gorge and the profound ways this intervention has shaped interactions between the river and downstream settlements such as Bamboi. Since the dam’s construction, various studies have documented its impacts on villages that were forcibly resettled, such as Gyama (see Wilmsen and Adjartey, 2020; Koranteng and Shi, 2018; Asiamah, 2015). Although Bamboi was not displaced or resettled like Gyama and other affected communities, the village remains directly impacted by the socio-ecological consequences of the Bui Dam – a phenomenon that is common when governments modernise and appropriate the benefits of water resources (Atampugre et al., 2016).

Premising this chapter on the waterscape of Bamboi therefore sets the foundation for understanding the co-constitution of the relationship between the people of Bamboi and their surface water resources, including the BVR, *Suukɔrl* pond and *Mofaga*⁹ stream. The analysis centres on how residents interact with these water bodies and how, in turn, the water bodies are shaped by these interactions over time. Understanding Bamboi's waterscape thus contributes to unravelling the patterns of interest, authority, and decision-making that relate to the village's water resources. By extension, it highlights the dynamics of the actors engaged in the everyday interactions between the village and these water sources.

4.2 Ground and surface water resources of Ghana

In this section, I have discussed the ground and surface water resources of Ghana – placing particular emphasis on the river systems – and the ways in which human interactions with these surface water bodies continually reshape their physical characteristics. This broader discussion of water–human interactions establish the foundation for contextualising the waterscape of Bamboi. Whilst rainwater remains an important source of water in Ghana and often defines patterns of farming and other agricultural activities among peasant farmers (Owusu et al., 2008), it is presently less influenced by political actions. Hence, my analysis in this chapter will exclude rainwater. In the subsequent text, I therefore begin by interrogating the two main sources of water in Ghana – groundwater and surface water. This discussion is essential for understanding how people and institutions are differently positioned in their engagements with water within the study area. I then narrow the focus to surface water sources, as these constitute the core of waterscape framing and significantly drive decision-making interests and appropriation processes in Ghana. The discussion

⁹ For most parts of this chapter and subsequent analytical chapters, my emphasis on the surface water resources in Bamboi will dwell mainly on the BVR. The *Suukɔrl* pond and *Mofaga* stream will only be referenced when their inclusion in the analysis is substantial.

further places emphasis on the BVR and the making of Bamboi to illuminate the drivers of human-water relations in the village.

Ghana is a riparian country bordered by Cote d'Ivoire to the west, Burkina Faso to the north, and Togo to the east, with the Gulf of Guinea forming its southern boundary. It possesses a complex network of waterways and a diverse terrain characterised by coastal plains, savannahs, mountains, and thick forests (Obuobie and Barry, 2012). The country hosts a variety of river systems that are central to the supply of freshwater for human and biodiversity sustenance (Ayivor and Gordon, 2012), with the Volta River system standing out (Van de Giessen et al., 2001) in terms of land area coverage, energy generation, transportation, food production, and multiple other appropriations. These rivers, along with their many tributaries, originate from various borders and corners of the country, contributing to a sophisticated and extensive drainage network. Whilst the complexity of Ghana's river systems makes management challenging, these challenges are further heightened by the politics of interests between the state and local residents – often poor peasant farmers and fisherfolk – who rely directly on these rivers for their livelihoods. An important trend within Ghana's water systems concerns the ways transportation shapes the economies of settlements adjacent to rivers. The proximity of a river system to a human settlement, combined with reliable transport infrastructures such as roads or canoe networks, enhances local economies far beyond subsistence farming or fishing activities.

The water resources potential of Ghana is broadly categorised into two main components: groundwater (Obuobie and Barry, 2012) and surface water (Baddianaah et al., 2024) sources. In the next section, I detail the composition of these systems and demonstrate how they relate to Ghana's water demands and needs.

4.2.1 Groundwater in Ghana and the nature of access in Bamboi

The groundwater in Ghana is generated from three main geological sources: 54% from the basement complex, consisting of crystalline igneous and metamorphic rocks; 45% from the consolidated sedimentary formations underlying the Volta Basin, including the limestone horizons; and 1% from the Mesozoic and Cenozoic sedimentary rocks (Owusu et al., 2016). Groundwater sources in Ghana are therefore largely shaped by deep underground geological formations and are accessible only through significant excavation to reach the water tables (Obuobie and Barry, 2012), from which water is then extracted through pipe stands, wells, or other containment systems.



Figure 10: Groundwater extraction in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2022/23.

Whilst groundwater is comparatively high in quality – largely due to the depth at which it occurs – the process of reaching the water tables in Bamboi requires considerable financial and technical commitment, as well as sustained effort to maintain water flow throughout the year. These constraints make rainwater harvesting and untreated surface water sources such as the BVR, Suukørl pond, and Mofaga stream alternative “potable” sources for residents.



Figure 11: Rainwater harvesting and storage in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

In a Key Informant Interview (KII) with a local government staff member (Government Staff 1) who had worked at the Bole District Assembly for at least three years, it was revealed that groundwater sources typically meet quality test standards, particularly when compared to surface water sources, which are frequently polluted by solid and liquid waste from surrounding towns and villages. Although the quality dynamics between groundwater and surface water remain subjective (Uddin et al., 2021) and sometimes inseparable because they interact at different hydrological levels (Lewandowski et al., 2020), Baddianaah et al. (2024) highlight that groundwater sources generally meet quality standards required to protect against common

waterborne diseases often associated with communities highly dependent on surface water such as rivers and streams.

Despite this, Government Staff 1 noted that variations in water table depth make groundwater provision in Bamboi expensive and often unsustainable – particularly because the motivation behind central government intervention in rural water supply is grounded in social welfare, not economic returns. As he explained:

“[...] in some of the villages in this District, the water tables are deeper down, and it costs a lot to drill [...] the issue is nearly similar to many places in the north. The water tables are difficult to reach and even if the Assembly [Local Government Office] commits to the process of generating water from the ground, the water will ‘disappear’ in the dry season [...] When you go back to Bamboi, ask their gatekeepers about the number of times we have tried digging boreholes without reaching the water table [...] The Assembly do not look for profit, so if it keeps investing its limited resources in one area [referring to water supply] without getting the results we expect to see, other areas will be lagging, hence, we sometimes focus on other priority areas [health, education, etc.].” (Government Staff 1, Bole District Assembly, fieldwork 2023).

This narrative of an “unreachable” water table reflects the lived reality in Bamboi. It was echoed by a female octogenarian in the Village Council of Elders, whose account – delivered partly as an appeal – highlighted how the depth of the water table has made groundwater an unreliable source of potable drinking water in the village. For people like her, who hold chieftaincy-linked responsibilities and are expected to champion village development, the inability to secure groundwater poses a daily concern. In a Key Informant Interview, she explained:

“On water-related issues, we are tired of that here in Bamboi. Government staff from Bole Assembly usually come here to check. When they come, they say the water is very far/deep. We invited some people from Wenchi and Techiman here to check. They repeated what the Assembly told us. When you drill water (ground), it does not come. If you [in reference to me] could do something about it, help us because we are tired.” (KII 4, fieldwork 2022).

Her narrative underscores the practical and emotional burdens borne by local leaders as they attempt to coordinate access to potable water through groundwater – sources often considered cheaper because they require less purification, given their lower vulnerability to contamination compared to surface water. However, the persistent failure of groundwater initiatives in Bamboi has meant that agricultural, domestic, and economic activities remain heavily reliant on surface water resources. This discussion therefore leads to the next section, which examines the surface water resources of Ghana before moving into the specific waterscape of Bamboi.

4.2.2 Surface water in Ghana and how they shape local systems

Surface water sources in Ghana are predominantly derived from three major river systems that traverse the country and extend into neighbouring states. These are the Volta River system – comprising the Red, Black, and White Volta Rivers and the Oti River – the Southwestern River system (Bia, Tano, Ankobra, and Pra Rivers), and the Coastal River system (Tordzie/Aka, Densu, Ayensu, Ochi-Nakwa, and Ochi-Amissah) (MWRWH, 2007). Collectively, these drainage systems shape the hydrological identity of Ghana. Notably, the Volta River system covers approximately 70% of Ghana’s total land area (240,000 km²), while the Southwestern and Coastal River systems account for 22% and 8%, respectively (MWRWH, 2007). All three systems generally flow southwards and empty into the Gulf of Guinea (Ampadu, 2021). As Ghana’s

principal sources of freshwater, these rivers play critical roles in supporting irrigation, inland fishing, aquaculture, and hydroelectric power generation (Nunoo et al., 2022).

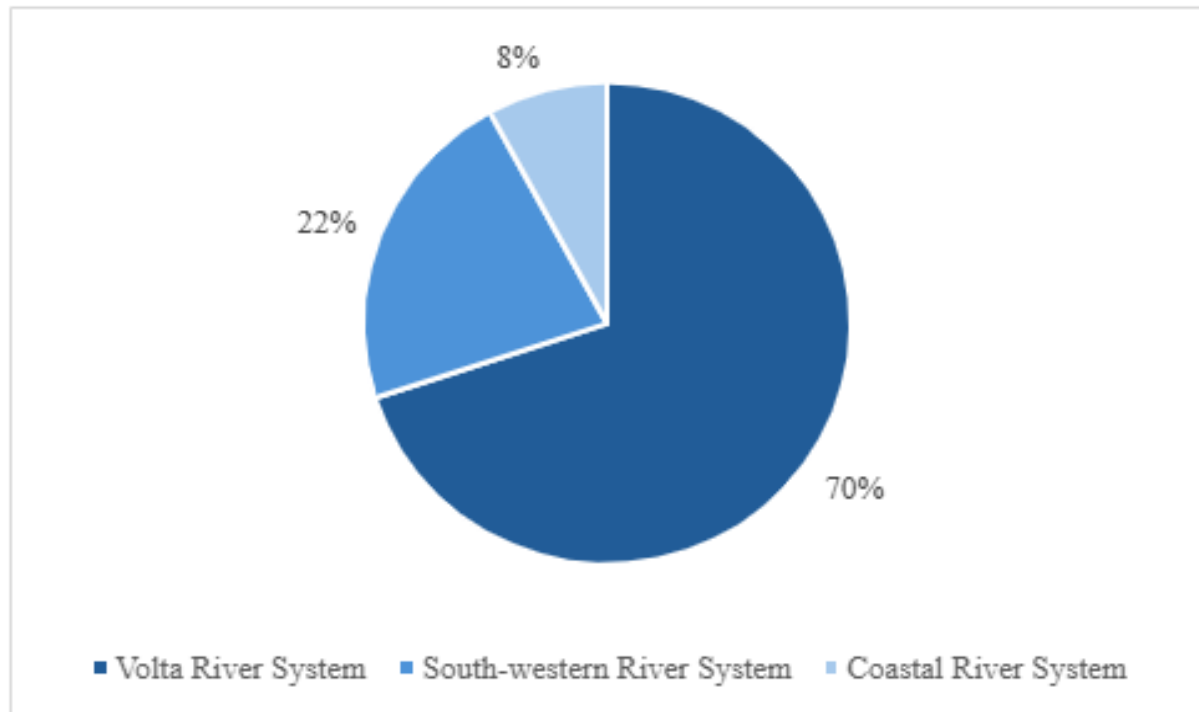


Figure 12: Dynamics of Ghana's River System

Source: Author's construct from MWRWH (2007).

The main rivers that constitute these systems include Tano, Densu, Pra, Ankobra, and Volta, each exhibit distinctive ecological, socio-economic, and political characteristics that shape the livelihoods and institutional arrangements within their catchments.

The Tano River, located within the Tano Basin, flows primarily through the Ashanti Region and spans roughly 400 km between latitudes 5°0'N and 7°40'N and longitudes 2°00'W and 3°15'N (Owusu et al., 2016). Its basin ranges from 0 to 700 m above sea level and lies within a wet and semi-equatorial climatic zone. The river sustains household water needs and agricultural production, including cocoa, vegetables, and rice cultivation (Owusu et al., 2016). However, these

socio-economic benefits have been compromised in recent years due to extensive pollution caused by illicit alluvial mining and unsustainable resource extraction (Nyantakyi et al., 2022; Edjah et al., 2021; Nyantakyi et al., 2021), drawing considerable national political attention.

The Densu River system, one of Ghana's key coastal basins, has undergone dramatic transformations due to infrastructure development, dam construction, salt mining, grazing pressures, and fluvial alterations. Geographically, it spans latitudes 5°30'N to 6°20'N and longitudes 0°10'W to 0°35'W, covering an area of approximately 2,488.41 km² and stretching 225.6 km in length (Kusimi, 2008). Originating from the Atewa Range, the river winds through both the Greater Accra and Eastern Regions before merging with the Gulf of Guinea (Ofosu et al., 2020). It supports diverse agricultural production – including cocoa, maize, cassava, sugarcane, and vegetables – and supplies water to multiple settlements (Kuranchie-Mensah et al., 2012). However, like the Tano, the Densu faces severe ecological threats such as pollution, sedimentation, and encroachment, leading to significant degradation of its riverine health (Fianko et al., 2010; Kusimi, 2008).

The Pra River, a major component of the 23,000 km² Pra Basin, lies between latitudes 5°N and 7°30'N and longitudes 2°30'W and 0°30'W (Duncan et al., 2018; Pra Basin, 2012). Originating from the Kwahu Plateau, it flows approximately 240 km southwards into the Gulf of Guinea. As a waterbody that spans the Ashanti, Eastern, Central, and Western Regions, the Pra supports domestic use, agricultural production, fishing, and industrial activity. Nevertheless, it has suffered extensive pollution due to deforestation, widespread illegal mining, and chemical contamination (Awotwi et al., 2017; Duncan et al., 2016; Pra Basin, 2012).

The Ankobra River, located east of the Tano and west of the Pra Basins, drains an estimated 8,403 km² in the southwestern part of Ghana (Asare-Donkor and Adimado, 2016). Positioned between latitudes 4°52'–6°27'N and longitudes 1°42'–2°33'W, it flows through the Western Region before emptying into the Gulf of Guinea (Asare-Donkor and Adimado, 2016; Akabzaa et al., 2009). The basin's humid climatic conditions support aquaculture and farming, yet its estuaries face mounting threats from heavy metal pollution, illegal mining, and ecological degradation (Effah et al., 2021; Klubi et al., 2018; Akabzaa and Yidana, 2011).

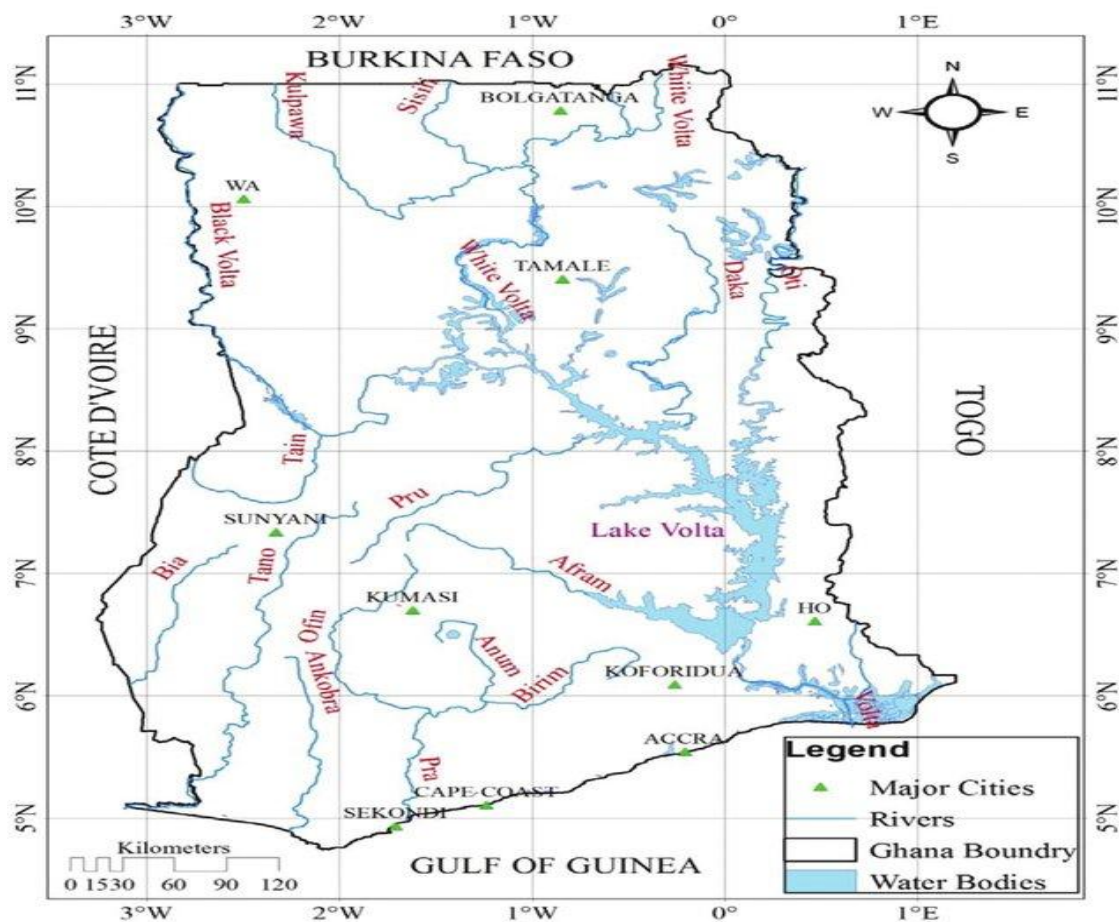


Figure 13: Map of Ghana indicating the major rivers and water bodies

Source: Ampadu (2021, no pagination).

The next is the Volta River System, which is located within the Volta Basin in West Africa with an estimated area of 400,000 km², stretching approximately from latitude 5° 30' N in Ghana to 14° 30' N in Mali (Biney, 2010; Barry et al., 2005). According to Agodzo et al. (2023), about 70% of the country is drained by the Volta River. The river's journey begins in Burkina Faso, meandering through Ghana, and concludes its course by spilling into the Gulf of Guinea (Barry et al., 2005). Ghana covers 42% of the Volta River whilst its neighbouring countries such as Burkina Faso cover 43%, and the remaining 15% lies within Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and Benin (Van de Giessen et al., 2001). The Volta River stands as a critical water resource for several uses, prominently generating hydropower through the Akosombo, Kpong, and Bui Dams, which are fundamental contributors to Ghana's electricity production (Abungba et al., 2022; Biney, 2010).

Whilst the river systems of Ghana collectively contribute significantly to local livelihoods, transportation, and the socio-cultural sustenance of both urban and rural economies, these rivers have increasingly been shaped by complex and shifting dynamics of interest. These interests are particularly visible in the interactions between the State and local residents who reside close to water resources. The State's interest in water resources manifests in several ways, including the establishment of transport corridors over rivers (such as the Adomi Bridge¹⁰ and the Bamboi bridge on the BVR), the construction of dams – especially along the Volta system – to electrify the country, and the granting of mining licenses for alluvial mining, a practice that has visibly altered the physical shape, quality, and socioeconomic benefits of many rivers. On the other hand, these state-led pursuits intersect and sometimes compete with local uses of rivers for livelihoods. Against the background understanding that natural resources are gifts of nature, local people have long appropriated surface water sources for everyday purposes in ways that also shape the nature,

¹⁰ See Eitelberger and Widmann (2015).

rhythms and flow of the rivers. I will expand this argument in the subsequent section, where I elaborate on the peculiar characteristics of the Volta River system and its role in shaping the waterscape of Bamboi.

4.3 The Volta River System (in Ghana)

The Volta River is the longest of Ghana's rivers, stretching approximately 1,065 kilometres (about 661.76 miles). It forms part of the wider 400,000 km² international basin that collectively constitutes the Volta Basin, covering almost 28% of the West Coast Basin of Africa and spanning Benin, Togo, Ghana, La Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Mali (Owusu et al., 2008; Amisigo, 2005). The system itself is a confluence of the Black Volta, White Volta and Red Volta Rivers, each originating from distinct areas of the northern geographic corridor and flowing steadily south toward the Gulf of Guinea (Mul et al., 2015). The basin extends across longitude 5° 30 W to 2° 00 E and latitude 5° 30 N to 14° 30 N (Amisigo, 2005).

The Volta's hydrological journey begins with the Black Volta (also known as *Mouhoun*) in Burkina Faso, traversing the northern landscape of Ghana before concluding its course at the Gulf of Guinea (Mul et al., 2015). A second major contributor to the Volta River System is the White Volta River, known in Burkina Faso as the *Nakambe* River, which also originates in Burkina Faso and merges with the Black Volta near Tamale in Ghana's Northern Region. The Red Volta River rises from northern Ghana and feeds the southward flow. The merging of these tributaries forms the Volta Lake, a vast water body extending over 400 kilometres (about 248.55 miles), making it one of the world's largest man-made lakes (Gbedemah et al., 2023).



Figure 14: The Volta Basin in West Africa

Source: Mul et al. (2015, p.38).

Although major rivers across Ghana support livelihoods both along riparian corridors and in distant communities, the Volta River System stands out in its multidimensional significance (Mul et al., 2015). It sustains several critical sectors, particularly hydroelectric power generation, agriculture, fishing, transportation and tourism (Mul et al., 2015; Owusu et al., 2008). Beyond its ecological and economic functions, the system remains centrally important in Ghana's national political

discourse, especially regarding hydroelectric power (Logah et al., 2017). With its tributaries, the Volta River System accounts for an estimated 560 MW of Ghana's electricity generation (Arthur et al., 2020).

A deeper interrogation of Ghana's hydroelectric infrastructure reveals intense competition over access to, control of and use of landscapes surrounding the river. This competition is evident in the socio-political and ecological debates around dam construction, where studies such as Abungba et al. (2022), Mettle (2011), and Miescher and Tsikata (2009) document the recurring and often irreparable socio-ecological transformations hydropower projects impose on communities and ecosystems. The authority to control natural resources – including water – is entrenched in Ghana's legal and constitutional frameworks, particularly the 1992 Constitution¹¹ of the Republic of Ghana (Articles 257, 268 and 269)¹² and various Acts of Parliament such as the 1996 Act 522 that establishes the Water Resources Commission¹³. These legal instruments delineate how water landscapes are governed and appropriated at the national level.

¹¹ The 1992 constitution of Ghana: <https://judicial.gov.gh/index.php/the-laws-of-ghana>

¹² Land and natural resources: <https://judicial.gov.gh/index.php/land-and-natural-resources>

¹³ Water Resource Commission Act, 1996 (Act 522): <https://ir.parliament.gh/handle/123456789/2056?show=full>.

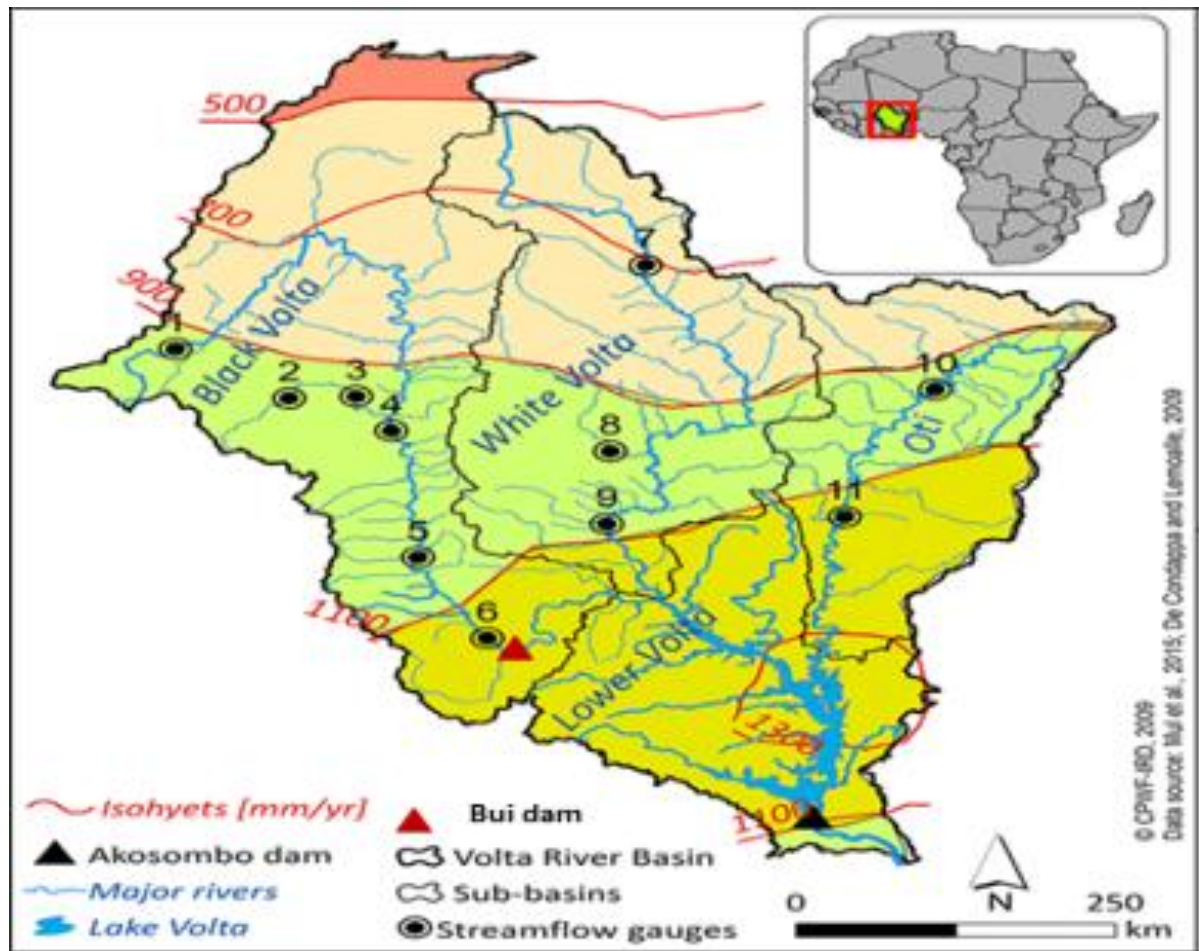


Figure 15: The Volta Rivers basin showing major rivers and dams

Source: Adapted from Dembélé et al. (2020, p.5385).

This centralised control of water resources has a long genealogy, having shifted from traditional custodianship to modern elite state governance through the processes of colonisation and post-colonial state formation (Atampugre et al., 2016). For example, the 1903 River Ordinance enacted by the British Colonial Administration of the then Gold Coast established the initial legal basis for centralised state authority over water resources (Opoku-Agyemang, 2001). In contemporary Ghana, the State's authority over natural resources, including water, is sanctioned by Act-1996, Act 522, which formally establishes the Water Resources Commission.

4.4 Drivers of politics in the waterscape of Ghana

The rivers of Ghana traverse diverse administrative, ecological, and geological zones, providing freshwater for drinking, food production, recreation, tourism, transportation, security, and hydroelectric energy generation, thereby sustaining multiple ecosystems, livelihoods, and ways of life (Mul et al., 2015). As indispensable ecological assets, Ghana's river systems play a monumental role in fostering human wellbeing and environmental resilience (Gbedemah et al., 2023; Owusu et al., 2016). These aquatic systems support rich biodiversity, providing habitats for a wide range of flora and fauna and contributing to the maintenance of ecological equilibrium. They also function as vital conduits for trade, transportation, and economic exchange, helping to integrate local markets and stimulate socio-economic development across rural and urban settings.

Given the multiplicity of benefits derived from surface water resources, the Government of Ghana (GoG) has enacted various policies and laws that prioritise and protect its authority to appropriate and manage them. Meanwhile, these same benefits serve as powerful pull factors that attract human settlements to riparian areas, where communities depend on rivers both directly and indirectly for livelihoods. Whilst local residents harness these waters for fishing, smallholder agriculture, and domestic use, the GoG – through its statutory institutions – derives parallel sets of indirect and direct benefits, including tourism revenue, transportation taxes, and the strategic generation of hydroelectric power. Indeed, since the transition from British colonial rule to independent national governance in the late 1950s, hydroelectricity and the electrification of rural and urban constituencies have featured prominently in electoral campaigns and political manifestos. These commitments have become part of the informal social contract between the state and citizens, shaping political legitimacy, voter expectations, and development rhetoric.

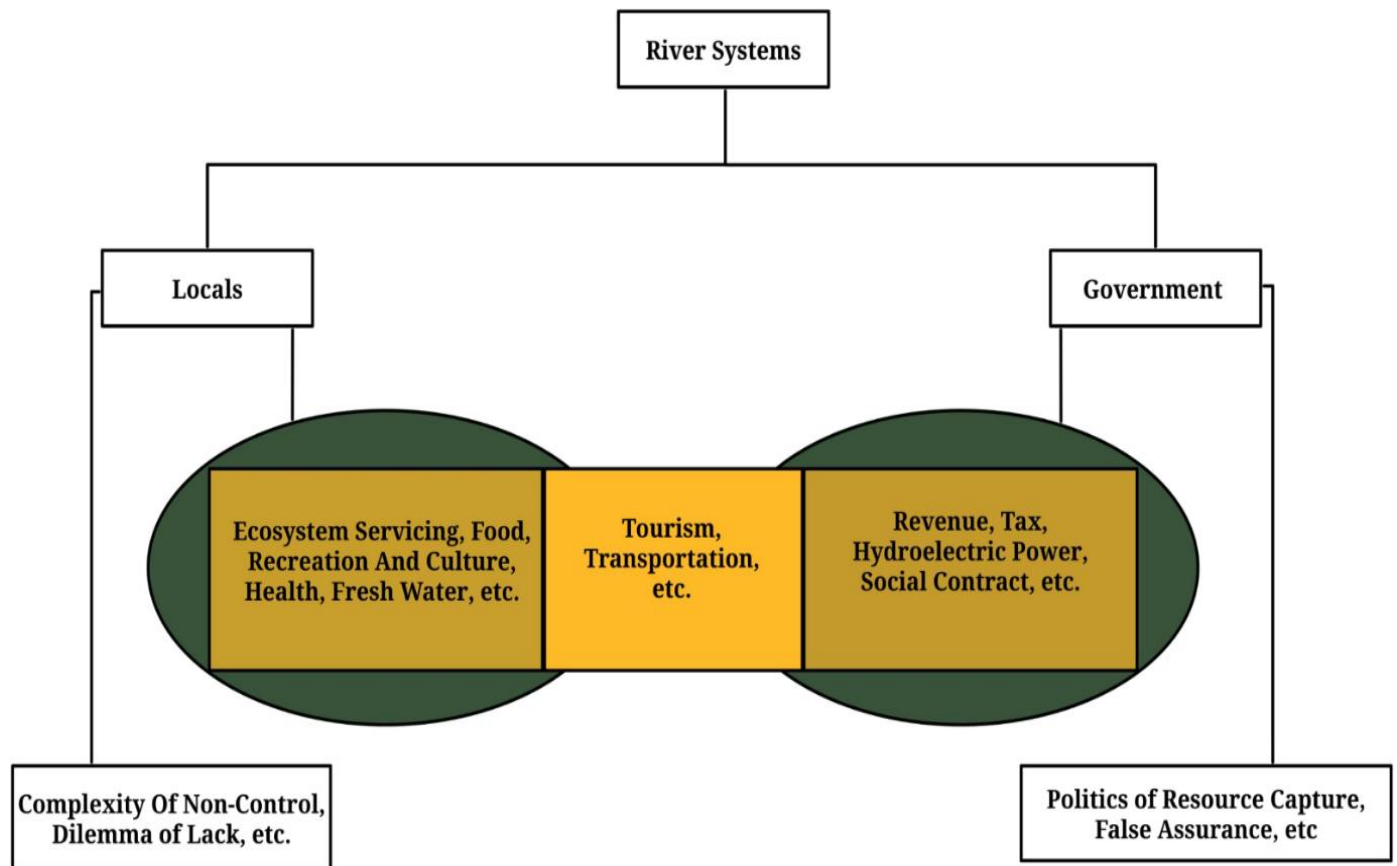


Figure 16: Water interests in Ghana

Source: Author's construct.

However, the differentiated interests, power configurations, and appropriation logics that surround surface water resources often result in uneven access, control, and management between riparian communities and the national government. These dynamics reveal how water governance becomes a politically charged arena in which authority, identity, and territorial rights intersect. Against this background, this section focuses on four major drivers through which political power manifests and is reproduced within Ghana's waterscape: Political prioritisation; Rural and urban hydropower electrification; Competing water resource rights and claims between the state and local residents (particularly those with autochthonous entitlements); and Modern infrastructure development (such as transportation) undertaken by the State. These drivers manifest how power is mobilised,

negotiated, and contested in the governance of Ghana's water resources, providing a foundation for understanding the multi-scalar political interactions that shape local experiences and institutional arrangements in riparian contexts.

4.4.1 Political prioritisation

Amidst limited and often overstretched public resources, the Government of Ghana has adopted a range of decision-making strategies intended to ensure the judicious allocation of state resources across both urban and rural areas of the country (Tandoh-Offin, 2013). One of the most critical domains in which these allocative decisions manifest is the government's investment in technical infrastructure designed to facilitate access to potable water for settlements across Ghana (MWRWH, 2014). The distribution of potable water infrastructure – alongside other social amenities – is formally guided by national planning standards (Town and Country Planning Department-TCPD, 2011).

Although this provisioning is executed through decentralised institutions such as the GWCL, CWSA, and local government authorities (MMDAs), and is often framed as a bottom-up process aligned with participatory decentralisation (see MWRWH, 2014; Tandoh-Offin, 2013), ultimate decision-making authority rests with central government. Consequently, budgetary constraints, national development priorities, and the geographical preferences of the central government heavily shape the final distribution of water infrastructure (Ampratwum, 2022). Despite the existence of clear planning standards that specify appropriate population-to-infrastructure ratios and the types of water systems different settlements merit (see TCPD, 2011), the empirical reality is that distribution remains uneven. Some communities receive infrastructure far beyond what their

population warrants, while others – often with significantly higher populations – remain underserved.

This unevenness positions potable water provision not merely as a technical or hydrological matter but as a deeply political one (Amankwaa et al., 2024). The groundwater challenges narrated earlier in section 4.2.1 may shape local water realities, but the broader landscape of water provision is determined by political prioritisation. Everyday interactions in Bamboi reflect this understanding: residents routinely interpret the adequacy or inadequacy of water infrastructure as the outcome of political decision-making processes rather than natural limitations. This perception was clearly illustrated in a Key Informant Interview in Bamboi:

“Madam, since you are from Kumasi and closer to Accra [referring to the capital of Ghana and the seat of the central government], you can advocate for us. We [referring to himself and other village leaders who have initiated actions to follow-up on water infrastructure that the village’s population require] have tried our best but we have not seen any substantial result. [...] We have followed up several times in the district but once our need is not important to the government, we will waste a lot of time. [...] There are small towns in the Bole District who have access to systems that Bamboi rather deserves. [You] just look at New Longoro here [pointing to the town south of the BVR], their population is nowhere closer to Bamboi but they have a Village Water System with a residential CWSA Engineer and other staff. What can justify why Bamboi is cut off?” (KII 10, fieldwork 2022).

The reflections of KII 10 reinforce Amankwaa et al.’s (2024) argument that infrastructure provision in Ghana is shaped by political prioritisation. As Awedoba (1996, p.36) notes:

“Paradoxically, Bamboi and New Longoro, located in two different Administrative Regions, [of the south and north, respectively] are twin settlements separated by a ferry and now a bridge over the Lower Black Volta.”

However, the comparison made by KII 10 underscores a persistent pattern: the south – geographically and administratively closer to Accra – tends to receive higher priority in infrastructural development than northern settlements. This pattern is historically rooted, tracing back to the colonial administration’s spatial and political hierarchies.

In this context, the absence of a commensurate water system in Bamboi, despite its sizeable population and strategic location, becomes difficult to explain outside of the broader political economy of prioritisation in Ghana.

4.4.2 Rural and urban hydropower electrification and demands

Massive technological development – such as dam construction – hurts (Abrampah et al., 2015, p.279). Although hydropower infrastructure is often presented as an engine for modernisation and development, its social and ecological implications are far more complex and ambivalent. In Ghana, dam construction for hydropower generation has created a double-edged dynamic: on one hand, it stimulates economic productivity, supports industrial expansion, and enhances national development trajectories (Gyasi et al., 2018; Merem et al., 2018); on the other hand, such projects compromise the health, wellbeing, and safety of downstream populations as the chemical and ecological properties of rivers shift over time (Gbedemah et al., 2023), and they frequently cause displacement of local residents who retain ancestral, spiritual and livelihood ties to the riverine landscapes inundated by dam reservoirs (Abrampah et al., 2015; Mettle, 2011).

Whilst these adverse impacts are borne most directly by riverine communities within the geographical zones where dams are constructed (Anima, 2015), one of the largest benefits – hydropower electricity – is enjoyed by populations far removed from these localities. In contemporary Ghana, electricity has become not only a basic expectation, but a political commodity tied to national development aspirations. Industrial and domestic appetite for energy remains insatiable, and access to electricity continues to form part of the implicit social contract between successive governments and electorates across the country. Presently, approximately 70% of Ghanaians have access to electricity, with government agendas consistently pledging to expand coverage to the remaining 30% (Merem et al., 2018).

Hydropower generation in Ghana is heavily concentrated within the Volta Basin, where the construction of the Akosombo Dam commenced in 1961 (VRA, 2019). Since 1964, three major dams have been completed, and eight additional dams have been proposed within the basin. Each new hydropower intervention reshapes water–human relations, transforming river flows, ecological regimes, and socio-economic systems that have historically underpinned livelihoods. These transformations include downstream reductions in water quality, declines in fish populations, and disruptions to aquatic biodiversity (Gbedemah et al., 2023).

The subsequent section focuses on the political economy of the Bui Dam and situates Bamboi within the broader politics of national electrification. It demonstrates how political prioritisation – anchored in national struggles to meet hydropower demands – reconfigured livelihood pathways and risked the survival of downstream communities such as Bamboi. The discussion begins with Table 4, which outlines the existing and planned dams within the Volta Basin, including the Bui Dam.

Table 4: Existing and planned hydroelectric power dams in the Volta Basin in Ghana

Name of dam	Subbasin	State	Year	Capacity (MW)
Akosombo	Lower Volta	Existing	1964	1060
Kpong	Lower Volta	Existing	1981	120
Bui	Black Volta	Existing	2013	400
Juale	Oti	Planned		87
Pwalugu	White Volta	Planned		50
Kulpawn	White Volta	Planned		40
Daboya	White Volta	Planned		43
Koulbi	Black Volta	Planned		68
Ntereso	Black Volta	Planned		64
Jambito	Black Volta	Planned		55
Lanka	Black Volta	Planned		95

Source: Adapted from McCartney et al. (2012).

A considerable number of concerns have been raised regarding the Government of Ghana's decision to secure a loan from the EXIM Bank of China to finance the Bui Dam. Central among these concerns is the opaque nature of the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) that preceded the financing and construction of the dam (see Yankson et al., 2018; Hensengerth, 2013), especially the limited attention given to downstream implications (Owusu et al., 2019). Despite these criticisms, the Government of Ghana proceeded with construction, driven by mounting domestic and industrial pressures as the country grappled with one of the most severe energy crises in its history (Owusu et al., 2019). In this context, the Bui Dam became a politically strategic

project – embraced as a “bold” intervention that could secure public approval and political legitimacy (Yankson et al., 2018)



Figure 17: The first BPA-Bamboi stakeholder consultation post-dam construction

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

Although the immediate effects of the Bui Dam on upstream and midstream settlements such as *Gyama*, *Dokokyena* and *Akanyakrom* were extensive and widely documented (Yankson et al., 2018), the impacts on downstream communities – including Bamboi – have received comparatively limited scholarly and policy attention. Nevertheless, Owusu et al. (2019) identify Bamboi as one of the downstream communities substantially affected by the operation of the Bui Dam. One of the most notable downstream impacts relates to changes in livelihood structures,

particularly the fishing economy. A Key Informant, a fisherman in his 70s who had lived in Bamboi long before the dam's construction, explained:

"Before the road was constructed on the dam, some fishermen and residents in the village could mobilise travellers and paddle them on the canoe to cross the river to south or north. So, fishermen were fishermen and "drivers" [smiling] [...]. Before the dam was constructed, there were different kinds of fish species in the river. Now, the species have changed and even reduced in number. At this period in the previous years, I could get a lot of fish in my canoe but look [directing eye contact to the fish in his canoe by the banks of the river whilst he removes the fins with a knife] at what I got [...]. The delight in the river keeps changing." (KII 11, fieldwork 2022).

Another fisherman affirmed the decline in fishing livelihoods:

"Fishing in this village was a good job. A lot of people had canoes which they gave on rent and sharing agreements but now, most of them have stationed their canoe. Go to the Batorr line [making reference to the area predominated by the Ewe settlers], you will see the canoes abandoned and some being converted into other uses." (KII 12, fieldwork 2022).

A carpenter specialising in canoe construction also described the decline in canoe demand due to shifting livelihoods and heightened risks associated with post-dam fishing:

"Oh, the canoe jobs have reduced. It is not like before, but I get a few orders from the village and other people from different villages along the river. Fishing has reduced *koraa* [a local exaggeration meaning "drastically"]. People are even scared of fishing because one does not know when the excess water from the dam will be released. Fishing has become very dangerous." (Village Respondent -VR 7, fieldwork 2023).

These changes ripple through the local economy. A resident of 30 years, who operates a grocery shop [what is referred as *provision store* in Ghana] at the rest stops area of the village. She narrated the following near the rest-stop area, noted:

"Previously, you could get fresh fish from the riverbanks at very affordable prices. Even the grilled ones were affordable with varieties but now, I have to travel every week to a village towards the south [referring to south of the BVR] to buy fish for my home." (VR 3, fieldwork 2023).

These narratives collectively mirror the findings of Owusu et al. (2019), demonstrating how the Government of Ghana's political decision to construct the Bui Dam reshaped the economic and livelihood dynamics of downstream settings – especially in relation to the quantity and diversity of fish species that previously sustained Bamboi's fishing economy. These experiences also echo Abrampah et al.'s (2015) caution that massive technological development can cause deep social and ecological harm. Both the BVR and the fishing livelihoods in Bamboi have been negatively affected by the Bui Dam.



Figure 18: An interview with a “disappointed” fisherman

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

4.4.3 Competing water resource rights and claims

Until colonisation and the subsequent independence of Ghana, local residents exercised control over natural resources, including water, through customary tenure systems and lineage-based forms of stewardship (Anquandah, 2013). The presence and distribution of rivers and streams were central to the historical formation of settlements across the country, shaping patterns of mobility, subsistence, and socio-cultural organisation. Bamboi’s own settlement history reflects this broader national pattern, in which water availability and access constituted a core determinant of habitation.

However, the colonial state's reconfiguration of resource governance – later inherited and sustained by post-independence elite governments – generated enduring power asymmetries that continue to constrain local claims over water rights and participation in water-related decision-making processes. These colonial legacies are evident in the autonomy with which the Government of Ghana bypassed local consultations (Hensengerth, 2013) during the negotiation of the loan agreement with the EXIM Bank of China for the construction of the Bui Dam. Such unilateral decisions underscore how the central state routinely mobilises its authority to appropriate water resources without fully engaging the custodial knowledge and claims of local communities.

Dynamics of power therefore remain central to water-related decision-making in Ghana (Owusu et al., 2019). Decision-making authority typically gravitates toward actors and institutions with economic leverage, especially large businesses, industrial entities, and political elites (see Yankson et al., 2018). These groups often possess the capacity to shape, influence, or manipulate water policies in ways that advance their financial or infrastructural interests. However, this consolidation of power systematically sidelines marginalised groups – particularly rural riparian communities – whose voices and interests are frequently absent or diluted within formal governance processes. The resulting imbalance fosters inequitable distribution of water resources, privileging certain actors while disadvantaging others (Yankson et al., 2018).

This unequal power relationship, coupled with the competing interests of the Government of Ghana and local residents, manifests as a recurring political tension within water resource appropriation. Whilst local residents continue to assert autochthonous rights grounded in long histories of transfer, inheritance, ritual obligation, and lived experience, the state's authority over water is a derivative of colonial rule and the centralised governance structures institutionalised

after independence. Consequently, local customary rights and state regulatory authority often collide, producing contested terrains of legitimacy, entitlement, and control.

At present, the Ministry of Water Resources, Works and Housing bears overarching responsibility for water resources in Ghana (Mul et al., 2015). The Ministry operationalises its policies through four key bodies – the Water Resources Commission, Ghana Water Company Limited, Community Water and Sanitation Agency, and the Hydrological Services Department – as well as through other parastatal agencies such as local governments. These institutions collectively reinforce the centralised governance architecture of water resources, further entrenching the state’s dominance over a sector in which local communities have historically held custodial authority.

4.4.4 Modern infrastructure development

The construction of roads connecting villages, towns, cities, and neighbouring countries remains a major source of public enthusiasm in Ghana, largely due to the extensive benefits and rapid socio-economic transformations that accompany such government-led ventures (Obiri-Yeboah et al., 2024; Barajei et al., 2023; Danku and Antwi, 2020). Whilst large-scale road infrastructure – particularly highways – contributes significantly to local and national economies, they also reshape and sometimes transcend existing environmental patterns in complex ways (see Khanani et al., 2021; Ametepey and Ansah, 2014). Bamboi exemplifies a settlement whose socio-economic and ecological evolution has been repeatedly shaped by successive transport infrastructure regimes intended to connect Ghana’s northern and southern corridors.

Prior to the introduction of mechanised ferry services, mobility across the BVR was facilitated by locally owned and operated canoes. These canoes transported travellers – often requiring them to spend days in Bamboi psychologically preparing for the journey due to the river’s physical force

and the perceived ‘fear’ and ‘sacredness’ associated with it. Key informants recounted that owning a canoe during this period conferred both prestige and economic advantage, enabling operators to earn income through their river-based transport service.

This localised economic privilege shifted dramatically with the introduction of government-operated ferry crossings. Because ferry services were managed by the state, revenue from river transport was redirected from local canoe operators to government agencies. Additionally, ferries were widely perceived as safer and more reliable than canoes, reducing the length of time travellers spent in Bamboi before crossing. As confidence in ferry safety increased, the ritualised ‘preparation’ and culturally embedded caution around the river began to diminish. This transition reflects the broader dynamics of Ghana’s waterscape, in which changes in transport infrastructure not only alter patterns of mobility but also redistribute economic benefits and reshape local livelihoods.

A further transformation occurred with the construction of the Trans-ECOWAS Road under former President Dr. Hilla Limann, as part of General I. K. Acheampong’s Supreme Military Council Five-Year Development Plan. Since the 1980s, Bamboi’s local economy has been deeply responsive to the increasing vehicular movement along this major corridor. The road’s construction altered the spatial organisation of commerce by shifting economic activities from the immediate banks of the BVR to locations around the bridge abutments and the central areas of Bamboi. This shift facilitated the emergence of more “modern” commercial infrastructure – such as cement-built and tiled eateries, characteristic of Ghana’s urbanising architectural styles – thereby transforming the settlement’s economic landscape.

Ecologically, these shifts brought both relief and new challenges. The relocation of commercial activities away from the riverbanks initially improved the river's ecological condition, as direct anthropogenic pollution associated with trading and ferry operations declined. However, new forms of environmental degradation emerged. The expansion of Bamboi as a trading hub – driven by increased use of the Bamboi Bridge by local, national, and international travellers – combined with the enclave's undulating topography (with the river lying in a valley and the settlement on the highland), resulted in escalating solid and plastic pollution flowing indirectly into the BVR. In this new regime, pollution of the river became less direct but more diffuse, as everyday littering in the village centre was transported downslope into the river system. As several informants observed, local residents may have hesitated to engage in such behaviours had the pollution remained visibly and immediately connected to the riverbanks.



Figure 19: Polluted gullies a few meters to the BVR

Source: Fieldwork (2022/23).

In the next section, I examine the dynamics between the BVR and Bamboi, focusing on settlement histories, ethnic relations, and the evolving co-constitution of human-water interactions that continue to shape livelihoods, identity, and governance within the village.

4.5 Understanding the waterscape of Bamboi: The Black Volta River and the making of Bamboi

As previously established, the Volta River Basin comprises the Black Volta River (INCA reaches: BV1 to BV5), the White Volta River (INCA reaches: WV1 to WV6), the Oti River (INCA reaches: Oti1 to Oti5), the Lower Volta River (INCA reaches: L1 to L6), and the diverse land-use types

across their combined catchments. These hydrological systems are monitored through three main flow stations – Bamboi, *Nawuni* and *Saboba* – strategically positioned near the mouth of each major river (Addo and Dayinday, 2023). The Akosombo Dam outflow serves as the final flow station of the basin (Addo and Dayinday, 2023). Bamboi’s position as one of the primary monitoring nodes elevates its significance within the Volta Basin, especially in relation to how it shapes, and is shaped by, the BVR.

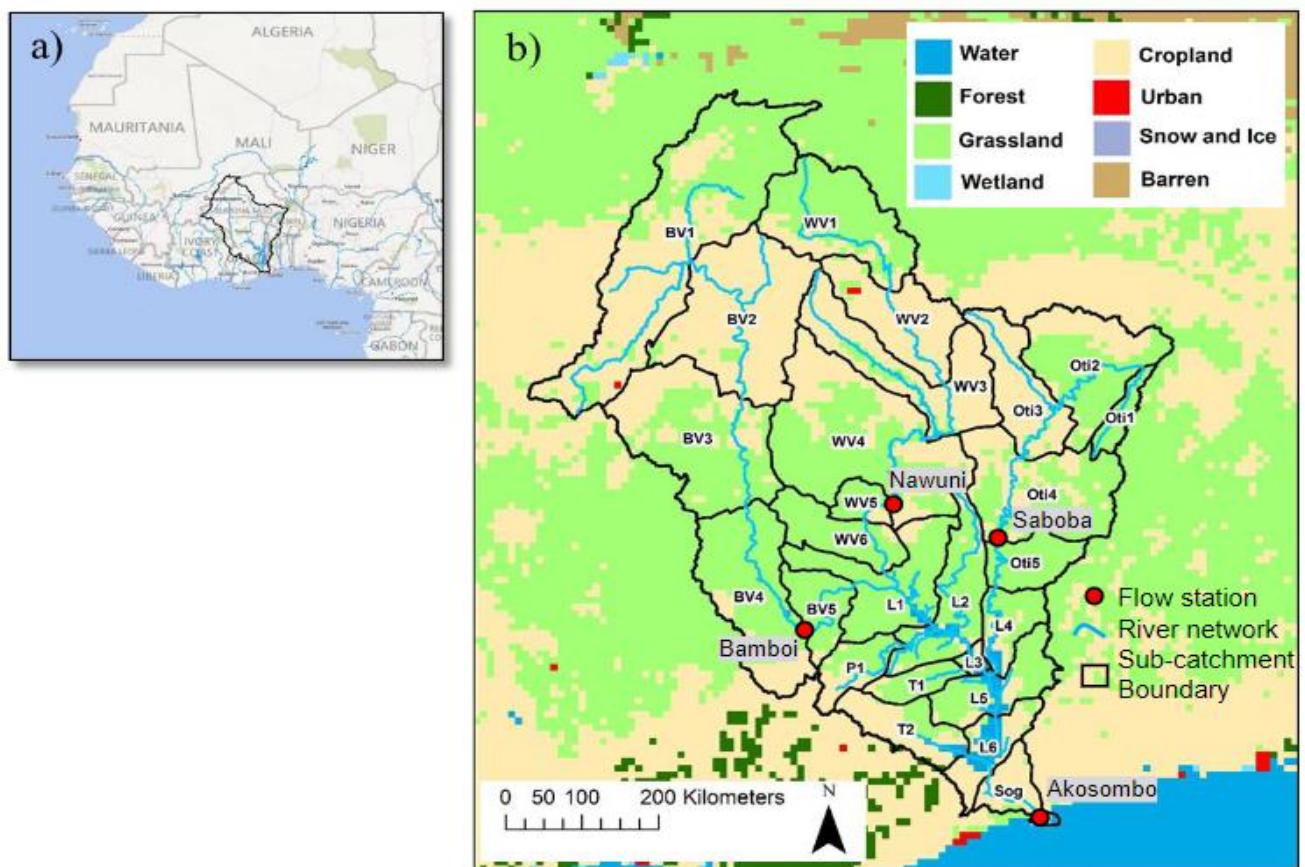


Figure 20: The Volta Basin showing Bamboi and other flow stations

Source: Addo and Dayinday (2023).

Cudjoe et al. (2023) demonstrate that water landscapes evolve through a combination of natural processes – including rainfall variability, climatic shifts, droughts, floods, and temperature increases – and anthropogenic drivers such as land-use change and hydrological interventions.

Whilst anthropogenic actions frequently intensify natural pressures on water systems, Cudjoe et al. (2023) also note that laws and policies can act as protective measures for natural resources. However, this position tends to obscure the politics of protection itself. In practice, natural resource governance – particularly for strategic resources like water – is deeply entangled with power. As Bazaanah (2020) argues, state laws often serve as instruments through which political elites consolidate control and appropriate the benefits of water resources.

Prior to colonial incursion, water governance in Ghana was embedded within customary systems grounded in local cosmovision (Atampugre et al., 2016; Anquandah, 2013). Water bodies were recognised as sacred entities, imbued with spiritual agency and governed through reciprocal relationships in which water could confer blessings or misfortune depending on human conduct (Greene, 2002). Colonialism, and later postcolonial regimes, disrupted these relational systems by introducing legal and bureaucratic structures that marginalised indigenous stewardship practices. Although implementation varied across periods, both colonial and postcolonial water laws consistently displaced customary authority in favour of state-centred, modernist management frameworks.

Atampugre et al. (2016) observe that this transformation reflected deliberate shifts toward legislation-based, technocratic paradigms motivated by climate change, globalisation, and population pressures. These state-driven frameworks subsequently structured the terms by which the Government of Ghana appropriates benefits from water resources – an argument I elaborated earlier in Section 4.4.1.

The subsequent paragraphs situate the iterative relationship between Bamboi and the BVR as it is shaped by its history and present engagements. As discussed earlier in Chapter Three, Bamboi is

a major settlement in the Bole District, one of seven administrative areas in the Savannah Region of Ghana (GSS, 2021). The Savannah Region itself was created in 2018 during Ghana's administrative redistricting exercise, which divided the former Northern Region into smaller, more manageable units. Bole District lies between latitudes 8°10.5' and 09° and longitudes 1.50E' and 2.45W, bordered to the north by the Sawla/Tuna/Kalba District, to the west by Côte d'Ivoire, to the east by the West Gonja District, and to the south by the Wenchi and Kintampo Districts of the Bono and Bono East Regions. Its southernmost point ends at Bamboi.



Figure 21: A view of the Black Volta River and Bamboi Bridge from the riverbank at Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

Bamboi lies in the Middle Volta Basin (Tonah, 2007), north of the BVR, and straddles the Trans-ECOWAS Road linking Ghana to Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. Historically, access across the river was facilitated by a ferry until the 1980s when the Bamboi Bridge – constructed by the Cementation Company – replaced ferry transit as part of a Five-Year Development Plan under the Supreme Military Council (Briggs, 2019; Damwah, 2011).

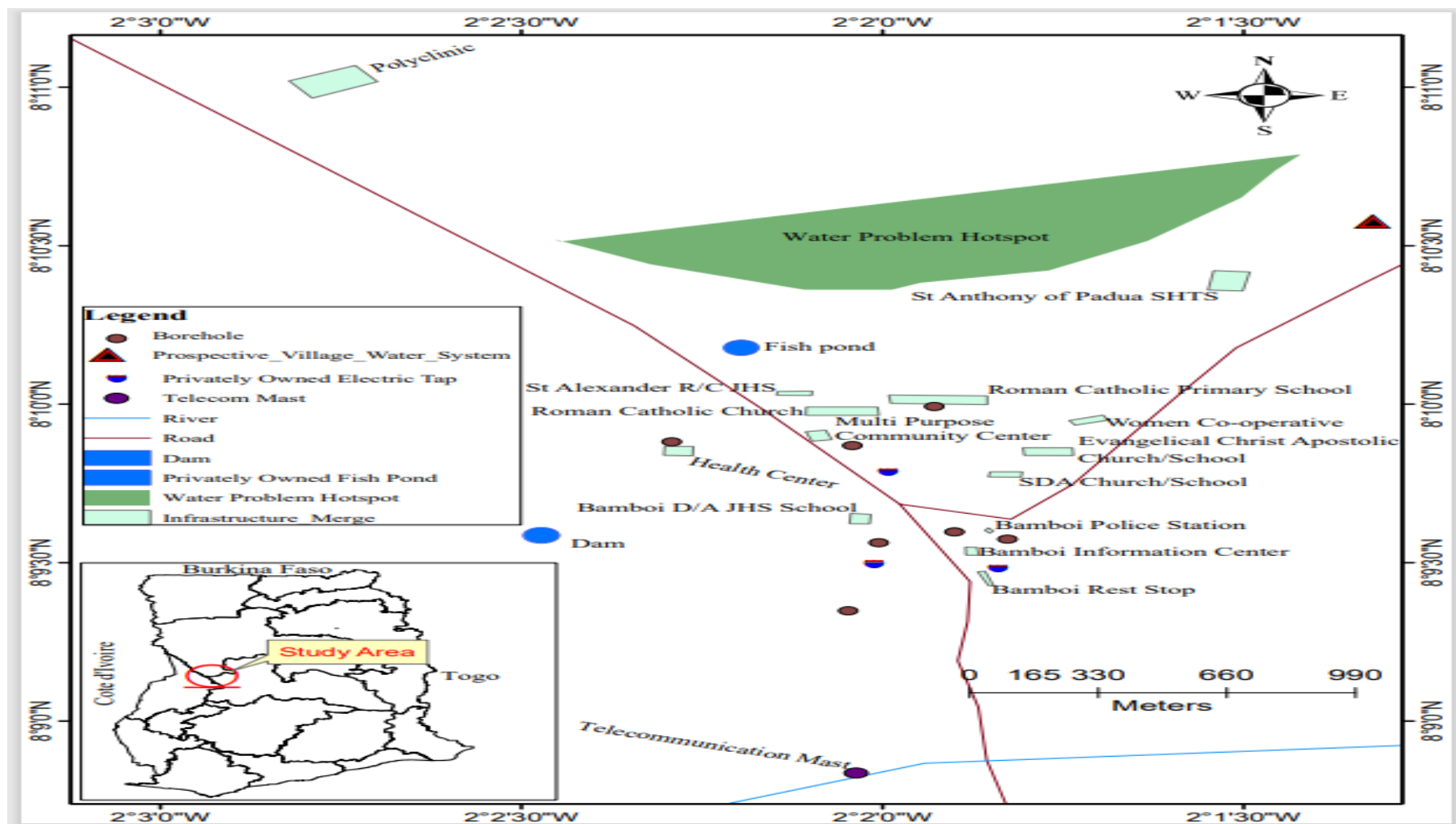


Figure 22: Physical and Social Environment Map of Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

Figure 22 depicts the physical and social features and infrastructure of Bamboi. The main autochthonous ethnic group found in Bamboi is the Mo/ Deg. The Mo ethnic group is divided into two groups based on their positions to the BVR. Bamboi, which is north of the BVR, is considered the administrative capital of the North Mo Traditional Council that oversees the Chieftaincy and customary land arrangements of smaller Mo-dominated villages and hamlets located north of the Black Volta River. Kintampo, a town in the Middle Volta basin, serves as the administrative capital of the South Mo Traditional Council as it is located on the south of the Black Volta River.



Figure 23: A view of a typical day in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork (2022/23).

Whilst there are different narratives on how the Mo ethnic group came into existence and settled at their present locations, the dominant narrative is that they originated from the Sissala ethnic group at the present-day Upper West Region but relocated due to an intra-tribal conflict. In a Key

Informant Interview with a Council of Elders member at the Bamboi Palace who is in his 70s, he shared an oral history that was passed to him. He narrated the following:

“We hailed from Sissala, Upper West. So, the people from Sissala are our relatives. However, we left Sissala because we fought over a dog’s head during one of our festivals. The fight was not resolved so those who felt threatened moved. If you understand the Deg/Mo and Sissala languages, you could spot the similarities” (KII 1, fieldwork 2022).



Figure 24: North Mo Traditional Council’s Office – Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2022.

The narrative of the Key Informant was reminisced from an oral history that has been passed on from the earlier settlers to the present. Regardless, my interactions with my field assistant beyond

this interview revealed several language similarities between the spoken Mo/Deg/Degha and Sissala. Beyond just the Sissala, there were traces of Dagaare and Waale in the Mo/Deg language. Dagaare and Waale are dominant spoken languages among the Dagao and Waale ethnic groups in the Upper West Region of Ghana, the region of the Sissala ethnic group. Grindal (1972) and Bendor-Samuel (1971) argue that the Sissala language has its roots in the Grusi branch of the Gur family and close lexical relationships among member languages of the Grusi cluster such as the Tamprusi, Chakali, Vagala, and Mo/Degha. To exemplify the “blood” relations between the Mo/Deg/Degha and the Sissala, my field assistant drew my attention to a cordial play-mating between the two tribes. The most significant one is the several encounters of “teasing”, and “pretentious anger” play between a Mo or a group of Mo natives that sell at the Rest stop area and Sissala passenger or private cars.

In one such encounter, a fifteen people-capacity yellow ‘Ssanyoung’ minibus had crossed the Bamboi Bridge from the southern part towards the north. The car had stopped for passengers to use the rest stop towards the other part of the journey. Without provocation, the driver who had alighted to buy water started insulting the water seller, calling him as uncivilized; a word that is not taken lightly in many local spaces in Ghana. Whilst I was unhappy and surprised by the scenario, I was later able to connect the trend of the interactions to the Mo-Sissala play-mating. In no time, what seemed like an exchange of insults suddenly turned into loud sounds of laughter. Subsequently, my research assistant informed me that it is an everyday occurrence in that area. It has been a good way of reconnecting with their “relatives” in the Upper West, to wit, the Sissala. This relationship is similar to the findings of Aasoglenang (2023) and Wegru (2000) in the northern regions of Ghana. Thus, whilst Wegru (2000) explores the inter-ethnic joking relationship between the Dagaaba and Gurune or Frafra of northwestern and northeastern Ghana, respectively,

Aasoglenang (2023) explores how the intra-clan joking relationship among the Dagara people of Nandom in northwestern Ghana offers a conduit for conflict resolution.

Whilst Mo has become an acceptable name for the Deg/Degha and has been used interchangeably by various authors such as Awedoba (1996), Grindal (1972) and Brendor-Samuel (1971), there are different narratives regarding the ethnic identity name, Mo. A Key Informant revealed that Mo is not the actual ethnic name but Deg. He connects a historical collaboration between the Ashanti and the then Deg during a war as the root of the name Mo. In the narrative, he recounted that the Deg had been consulted by a delegation from the Ashanti Council to support it with fighters toward a war between the Ashanti and another tribe. He indicated the below;

“We are not called Mo. Our real name is the Deg. Mo is another way the Asante people say, ‘thank you’. This, you know [referring to my identity as an Asante]. We [to wit, ancestors] helped the Asante people in one of their wars. When they won, they started referring to us as the *Mo* people, as a sign of saying those we have thanked. This signifies we are in a good relationship with the Asante people” (KII 1, fieldwork 2023).

Although the narrative was silent about the exact ethnic group, he recounted that the Ashanti won the war. Consequently, they started calling the Deg group with an Ashanti appellation of “thank you”, *Mo*. This later becomes the dominant name of the Deg ethnic identity.

On the contrary, another Key Informant who is a traditionalist and participates actively in the sanctification of the BVR presented a different narrative regarding the Deg/Mo ethnic identity. He connects the Mo ethnic identity name to the Black Volta River. He argued that the Black Volta River is called Mo in the traditional/customary sense.

“Nsuo no, wo kɔ Burkina o, Sɛ wo kɔ Cote D’Ivoire o, ɔmo fre no Mo. Obiara nim sɛ ɛha na nsuo no tiri wɔ” Literally, “For the water, if you go to Burkina or Cote D’Ivoire, they call it *Mo*. Everybody knows this is where the head [authority] lies” (KII 2, fieldwork 2023).

He mentioned the two neighbouring countries of Ghana since the Volta Rivers flow from them through northern Ghana before moving south-eastwards to enter Lake Volta. Whilst both stories make sense, the narrative of KII 2 relates closely to the name of the Black Volta River in Burkina Faso. The BVR is locally called Mouhoun while the White Volta River is called Nakambe in Burkina Faso. The first two letters of Mouhoun form the Deg ethnic group’s dominant name, Mo. The Black Volta River is locally called Nnaa Moo, especially among the traditionalists and the river priesthood family (Koorafon) in the village. Whilst there is a clear connection between the Mouhoun River and the Mo ethnicity according to the narrative of some of the village key informants on the river priesthood, there was not a clear establishment between the name *Koora* (the river priesthood family gate) and how it relates to the identities of the river. Regardless, this ethnography revealed that the name of God in Mo, *Korowii*, which directly translates as “owner of everything” have similar sound with *Koora* and the title of the river priest, *Mokooro*.

Moving on to the term *volta* [in the Black Volta River] and how it frames the localised cosmovision, the term *volta* is believed to have been imposed on the present-day Volta rivers by some Portuguese explorers due to the “turning”/meandering nature of the rivers (Banda, 2023; Ward, 2023; Nartey, 2017). Thus, *Volta* is the direct translation of “turn” in Portuguese (Dakubu, 2012). The BVR flows from Burkina Faso and turns northwards at Bamboi and later turns eastwards towards the south of Ghana. Whilst the turns of the BVR at Bamboi have physical and geological connotations (Obuobie et al., 2024; Addo and Dayinday, 2023; Yira et al., 2021), to some key informants in Bamboi, there is more to these turns than just physical and geological sequence. A

Key Informant revealed that these turns depict the power and uniqueness of the particular place of Bamboi's settlement. He expressed his thought on this in the following narrative:

“[...] here [Bamboi] is where the power of the river lies.” (KII 3, fieldwork 2022).

In a similar line of thought, another Key Informant who clings to the sanctification of the river shared this thought;

“Hwe, nsuo no, eha na ne tiri wɔ. Sɛ deɛ m'adinka aka akyere wo no, babiara a wo bɛkɔ biara a nsuo wei fa no, ɔmo nim sɛ Bamboi na eyi ho apae. Enam sɛ yɛ de saa buo no mma nsuo no, nfasoɔ bɛbibereɛ na efiri mu ma kuommafoɔ”, literally, “See, the water's [reference to BVR] head [power or authority] is here. As I have told you already, if you go to wherever this water passes, they know Bamboi is where we do the rituals of the river. Because we ascribe the respect [acknowledgement] to the water, there are a lot of profit [benefits] that accrue to the village residents” (KII 2, fieldwork 2022).



Figure 25: The BVR and other surface water sources in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork (2022/23).

To deepen his stands and associate the ‘turn’/meandering of the river at Bamboi to some cosmic attributions beyond physical and geological meanings and how this cosmic perspective shapes the local economy of Bamboi, KII 2 added these thoughts to his point;

"In less than 15 minutes' drive towards the south from Bamboi, you will spot a rest stop developed at your left side of the road. No matter how they try to outrun the trade of Bamboi, it will not stand. It is because the passengers that pass that stretch are passing through Bamboi. If they stop and eat there, what will happen to the traders in Bamboi? The river's 'head' is at Bamboi [nsuo no ti wɔ Bamboi]. How can the people be deprived of

benefits that accrue from the river? Let them go to the sky and return, there is a force (referring to non-physical powers) that will not make it stand. You mark my words! [pointing his hands to his eye, as he expresses his confidence in his opinion due to incidents over time]" (KII 2, fieldwork 2023).

The early maps of the Volta Rivers depicted changes in the currents at the mouth of the river (Dakubu, 2012). Bamboi is a major flow station of the BVR (Addo and Dayinday, 2023). Hence the changes in the flow and current at Bamboi is attributed to science. However, these physical descriptions are interpreted to mean more than physical attributions to KII 2. Thus, whilst KII 2 narrations confirm the physical characteristics of the Volta Rivers described by scholars such as Obuobie et al. (2024), Addo and Dayinday (2023) and Yira et al. (2021), the spiritual attributions KII 2 associates with the turns have received little to no scholarly attention in Ghana, and often relegated in global discourses on water governance. This neglect stems, in part, from the marginalisation of local cosmovision and culturally embedded ways of knowing, which often fall outside Western scientific paradigms and dominant notions of “modern” knowledge production (Tamale, 2020; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Oyewumi, 1997). Meanwhile, these worldviews provide important decolonial insights by foregrounding relational ontologies of water, thus, understandings of water as social, spiritual, and political, through which local people construct their connections to natural resources (Strang, 2023; Boelens, 2014; Linton and Budds, 2014). The tensions between scientific/Western-centric interpretations and localised ontologies of water disrupt neoliberal and technocratic framings, and call into question the universality of IWRM and related policy instruments that underpin formal water governance (Evaristo et al., 2023; Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017; Biswas, 2008).

In the next sections, I unpack the relationship between the BVR and Bamboi, and how it is shaped by state-level water decision-making and interfaces, particularly on the appropriation of the benefits of the BVR for Ghana.

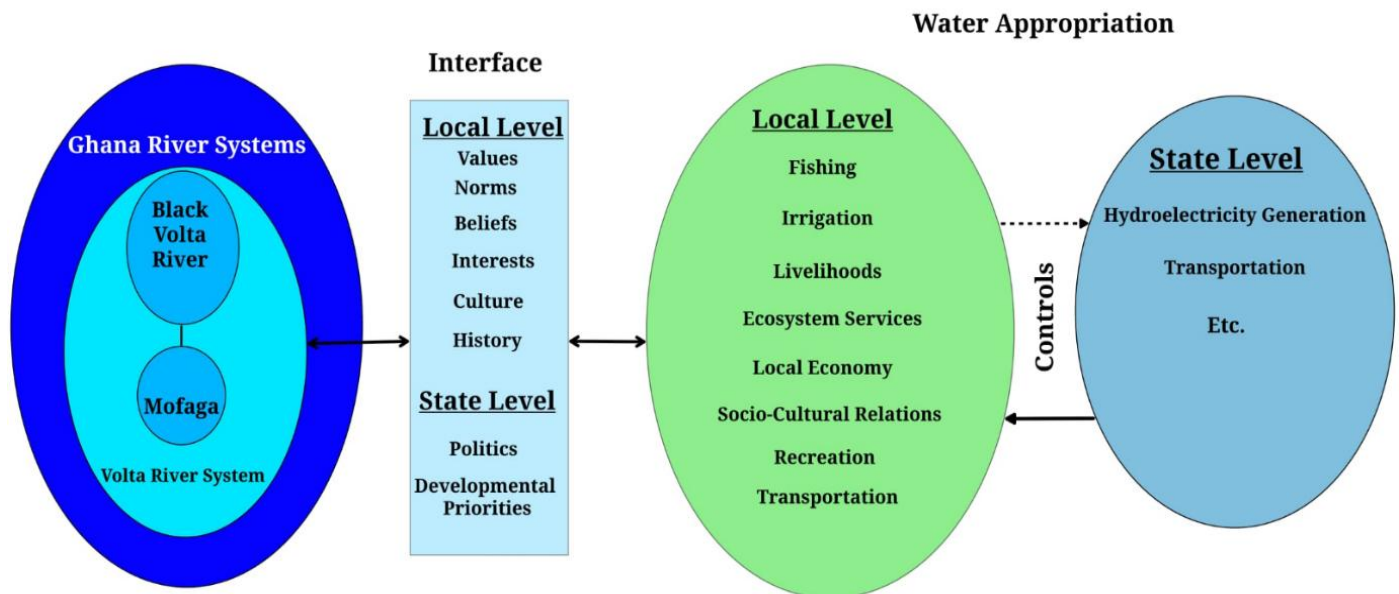


Figure 26: Bamboi amidst the water-society interactions

Source: Author's construct.

The BVR and Bamboi produce an iterative interaction; both entities affecting each other in unique ways, as shaped by the state-level decisions on strategic surface water resources. Figure 26 demonstrates the relationship between the three major entities; the BVR, the Government of Ghana and the Bamboi village. The BVR is situated in the river system of Ghana, holding significant importance due to the Bui Gorge that passed engineering and technical feasibilities for dam construction (Okyereh et al., 2019). This became useful by the GoG in a time that Ghana was going through energy crises (Miescher and Tsikata, 2009). The BVR drives the patterns of local economy in Bamboi. The river serves as a major source of water for irrigation farming, fishing, livelihood options (such as trading), ecosystem services, socio-cultural relations, recreation and

transportation in the Bamboi catchment. For instance, the river is useful for peasants and large-scale commercial farming in the village. By peasant farming, individual farmers rely on the consistent levels of water in the BVR post-Bui Dam construction to support their farming. The large-scale commercial farming in the village relates to organised private and state-sponsored farming whose products are marketed beyond the Bamboi village. In a conversation with a farmer in the village, he revealed the following:

“[...] although the river has changed due to the Bui Dam’s impact, it helps in farming all year around. At least, one is assured that one can always have water in the *adri* [localised jargon for the “BVR”] for farming in case the rain delays. [...] Even the Babator irrigation project relies mainly on the *adri* [BVR]. Go and see the appealing nature of the farming projects around that area [referring to the location of the irrigation]. [...] But as for fishing, *hmmm* [an expression of dissatisfaction], it has really affected it *paa* [an Akan exaggeration of “a lot”]. (VR 5, fieldwork 2023).

These local benefits that are driven by the BVR in Bamboi constitute the water appropriation of Bamboi.

On another hand, the GoG also derives water appropriations from the BVR. These are mainly large scale local and national projects that give the GoG goodwill in Ghana. Having overarching control over natural resources in the country by virtue of various legislative instruments and constitutional provisions, the GoG’s control over the BVR overrides the control of Bamboi and consequently have greater impacts on the appropriation of the water resources benefits of Bamboi.

Meanwhile, these appropriations from the BVR are mediated by certain features (interfaces) at the local (Bamboi) and state-level. At the Bamboi level, these interfaces are seen in values, norms, beliefs, interests, culture and history. The local interfaces define the ways in which the Bamboi

village relates with the BVR. For instance, the belief that the river has cosmic authority to reciprocate its treatment by the local village shapes the ways in which people in the village consider polluting the river. Since the relationship between the BVR and Bamboi is an iterative relationship mediated by the interfaces, the BVR also shapes the ways in which the norms, livelihood and values of Bamboi are frames. Thus, the presence of the BVR at the enclave shapes the ways in which the culture of the village residents is shaped. For instance, the village's annual water sanctification festival¹⁴, the creation and the reverence of the river priests (unique traditional roles in Bamboi) are shaped by the river. Thus, without the BVR's flow in the enclave, the water sanctification festival and the role of the water priests would not have existed and justified.

On another hand, political decision-making, legislation/legislative instruments and development priorities (such as hydropower generation) serve as the iterative interface between the GoG and the BVR. Thus, whilst the GoG's appropriation of the benefits of the BVR are driven by the legislations of control, development priorities and politics, the BVR can shape these interfaces. For instance, natural and human induced climatic conditions that increase or decrease the average rainfall along the BVR in the Bui Gorge catchment can reduce the operation ability of dam turbines and consequently affect its 400 MW capacity.

4.6 Conclusion of the chapter

This chapter has drawn on both literature and empirical material from Bamboi to respond to the first research question: "What are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how do they manifest in Bamboi?" By situating Bamboi within the broader waterscape of Ghana, the chapter demonstrated how national political priorities, historical legacies, and contemporary governance practices shape the flow, supply and use of water systems that underpin downstream settlements.

¹⁴ I have discussed this in Chapter Six.

In doing so, the chapter established the conceptual and empirical foundations necessary for understanding how colonial, postcolonial and current political processes reconfigure water governance in Ghana and, by extension, in Bamboi. Three key concluding arguments follow.

First, the chapter showed that waterscapes in Ghana are continually reshaped by the interactions between human populations, livelihoods and state power. Activities such as fishing, dam construction for hydroelectricity, and pollution linked to mining intersect with the authoritative controls exercised by the Government of Ghana through constitutional and legislative instruments – particularly Articles 257, 268 and 269 of the 1992 Constitution and statutory provisions such as Act 1996 and Act 522. Whilst these instruments vest autonomy over water resources in the central government, primary settlers continue to assert autochthonous claims that long predate statutory water governance. The chapter therefore argued that the state’s dominance – and the historical transfer of control from local custodians to the central government – weakens local accountability structures and complicates water resource management. At the same time, the state’s appropriation of water for hydroelectric development and other national projects has not translated into commensurate investment in potable water infrastructure for Bamboi, thereby creating governance and equity tensions.

Second, the chapter demonstrated how political decisions at the national level – particularly the damming of the BVR for the 400 MW Bui Dam – have altered both the physical and social flows of water in Bamboi. The strategic value of the BVR to the national electricity grid ensures that hydropower planning and political prioritisation continue to shape the interactions between the river and downstream settlements. In Bamboi, these dynamics extend beyond material access to influence identity formation itself. By tracing the Mo ethnic identity to the upstream source of the BVR – Mouhoun in Burkina Faso – the chapter illustrated Boelens’ (2014) argument that

waterscapes do not merely shape access and control over water, but also the identities, histories and cosmologies of the communities that inhabit them. Although the relationship between Bamboi and the BVR is historically rooted in precolonial cosmologies, the transfer of resource authority during the colonial and postcolonial eras has made state-driven political prioritisation the dominant interface structuring contemporary interactions.

Finally, the chapter revealed how the waterscape of Bamboi shapes and continually re-shapes the village's local economy. The evolution from canoe-based transportation to ferry operations and, subsequently, to the dominance of the Trans-ECOWAS Road and the Bamboi Bridge has shifted trading spaces, livelihoods and artisanal skills within the village. Crafts such as canoe-making have given way to motor-mechanic services and new commercial activities aligned with vehicular transit. These transformations underscore how waterscapes are not static ecological backdrops but active socio-economic terrains that reorganise local economies in response to infrastructural and political change.

Having located Bamboi within Ghana's broader hydro-social and political landscape, the thesis now turns from the macro-level dynamics of state, river and settlement to the micro-level negotiations through which everyday water decisions unfold. The next chapter therefore moves from the structural drivers of water governance to the lived, intersectional experiences that shape inclusion and exclusion in Bamboi's water decision-making spaces. It examines how age, sex, marital status, ethnicity, spirituality, personality, and social networks intersect to produce differentiated forms of authority, participation and silence in the village's everyday water politics.

CHAPTER FIVE

5 Everyday water institutions and the intersectional experiences in the multiple

waterscapes of Bamboi

5.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the complex interplay of intersectional experiences that shape everyday participation in water-related decision-making in Bamboi. These experiences emerge through categories such as age, sex, gender, socio-economic status, kinship, migration history, and other social markers. Recent water-governance scholarship increasingly foregrounds how such intersections structure exclusion and inclusion (Adams, 2024; Sultana, 2021; Truelove, 2019; Adams et al., 2018; Wrisdale et al., 2017). This shift reflects a recognition that governance itself can generate and sustain “unnatural” scarcity, unequal access produced not by hydrology but by decision-making and power. Because people occupy different social positions within the waterscape, they encounter this scarcity unevenly.

Historically, gender has dominated these debates, especially in work focused on the politics of water flow, access, and control. However, an over-investment in gender alone obscures the multiple factors that co-constitute exclusion and inclusion (Wyatt et al., 2022). As established in Chapters One and Two, singular readings of gender minimise the complex social realities that shape everyday life for Mo natives and non-Mo residents in Bamboi. This chapter therefore extends the analysis beyond maleness and femaleness to reveal the broader intersectional terrain through which water decisions and benefits are negotiated. It answers the second research question: who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi?

The chapter proceeds in three steps. First, it maps the two principal arenas of water decision-making – *water service provision* and *water safeguarding* – and clarifies their rationales. It then examines the everyday processes through which decisions are made across different ownership and control arrangements. Finally, it unpacks how intersectional factors including age, sex, gender, marriage, kinship, economic and educational status, social perception, job status, migration, personality, knowledge, religion, and political affiliation, differentially position residents in these processes.

Whilst no formal checklist determines who participates in water decisions (beyond the eligibility rules governing selection of ritual leaders such as the river priests), everyday authority emerges from how individuals' intersectional characteristics align or misalign with local social networks and moral expectations. These categories do not operate uniformly; their effects vary across individuals and situations, illustrating the fluidity and context-dependence central to intersectional analysis. Ultimately, this complexity exposes the reductive nature of dominant gender-mainstreaming frameworks, such as SDG 6, which isolate “gender” as the principal axis of inequality and thereby overlook the fuller constellation of social dynamics shaping water access and decision-making in Bamboi.

5.1 The spaces of water decision-making in Bamboi

The formal governance of Ghana's water resources, including domestic supply, agricultural provision, and surface-water management, is implemented through multiple national and decentralised (MMDAs) agencies (see Figure 27) but fundamentally does not recognise localised and long-standing cultural structures that govern water. When communities were mentioned in the framework, they were framed as customers (drawing attention to the economic underpinnings of framework) than co-producers of the governance system.

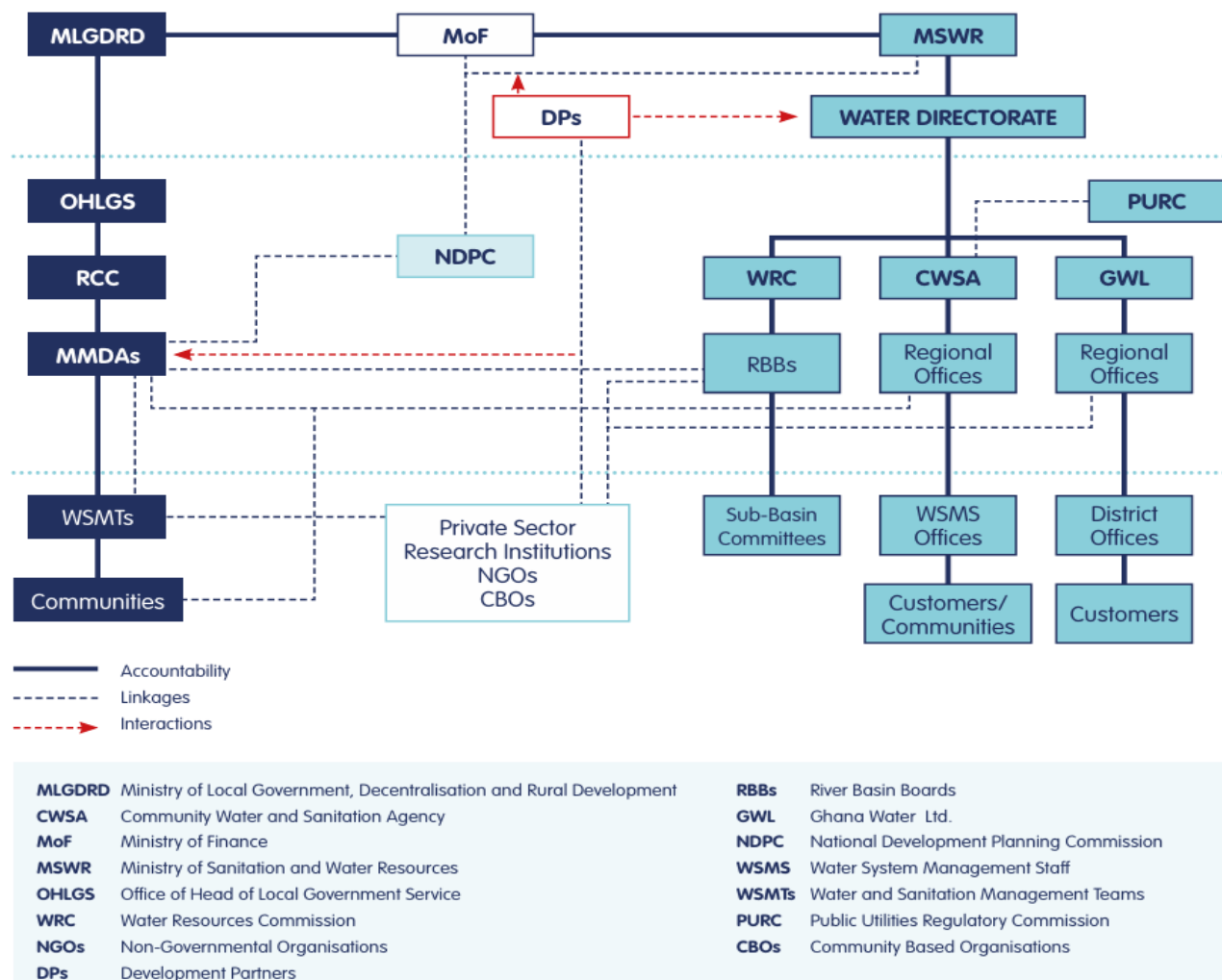


Figure 27: Institutional arrangements for water policy implementation

Source: Ministry of Sanitation and Water Resources (2024, p.46).

Meanwhile, this ethnography shows that in Bamboi, water decision-making is fundamentally organised around two intertwined systems: water service provision and water safeguarding. Together, they shape the core drivers, priorities, and actors involved in determining how water is accessed, regulated, and protected. Water service provision centres on securing potable water for

drinking and agricultural use. Water safeguarding, by contrast, is driven by a commitment to “protecting” surface-water sources, particularly the BVR¹⁵.

Sub-sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.2 examine the specific actors, rationales and decision-making processes within these two domains, illustrating how inclusion and exclusion emerge from the intersectional characteristics that shape people’s identities and social affiliations in Bamboi. Figure 28 summarises how these systems function in parallel, each with distinct priorities and logics. Later in Chapter Six, I further unpack the attributes and interconnections between the centralised governance arrangements and the village’s longstanding spiritual stewardship, demonstrating how their interaction provides a pathway for water bricolage in Bamboi.

¹⁵ Chapter Six unpacks what this means in the worldview of Bamboi.

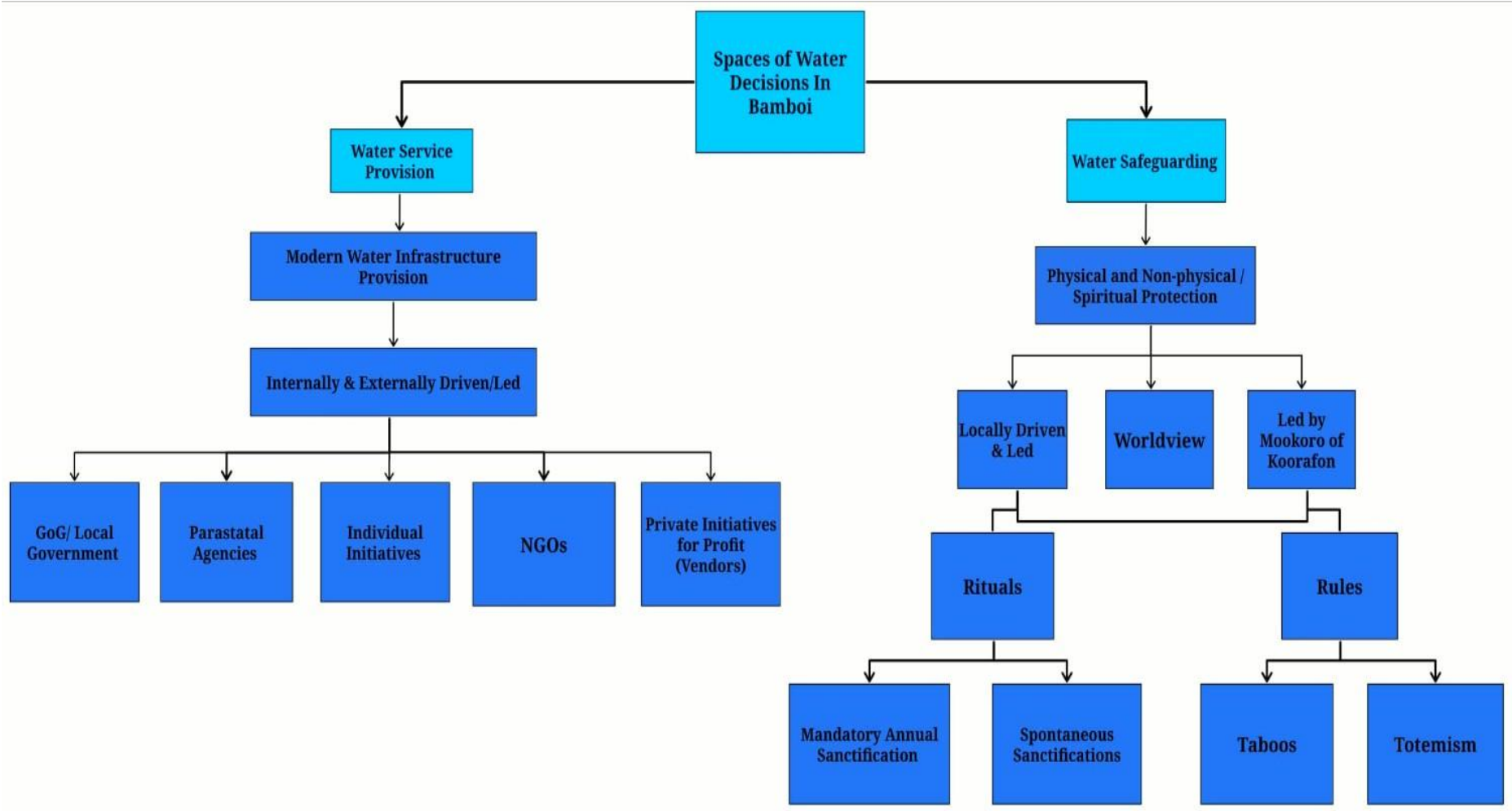


Figure 28: Spaces of water decisions in Bamboi

Source: Author's construct.

5.1.1 Water service provision

The focus of *water service provision* in Bamboi is the availability of potable water for drinking and enough for industrial and agricultural purposes. The provision of water is preceded by “modern” water infrastructure such as boreholes, electric pipe-stands, and irrigation projects. This focus is spearheaded by Government of Ghana institutions such as the Bole District Assembly (the local government authority of Bamboi) through the Development Planning and Works Departments. Beyond the Bole District Assembly, parastatal agencies such as the Babator Irrigation Project, a village-based irrigation system located at the eastern periphery of Bamboi (see Caminati Engström, 2020), has positioned itself as a water service provision agency for small-large scale agricultural projects within the Bamboi enclave and above. Figure 29 captures the main actors that form the water service provision in Bamboi.



Figure 29: Actors of water service provision

Source: Author's construct.

Furthermore, NGOs, such as the Zakat Foundation, a religious-based local NGO engaged in social infrastructure projects in various places of northern Ghana, significantly feature in the water service provision through physical water infrastructure projects such as boreholes construction in Bamboi. Beyond Zakat Foundation, various local and international NGOs partner with the Government of Ghana through the Bole District Assembly departments to provide water for the village. Whilst the above water provision actors do not focus on profit (non-economic) in the provision of water services for Bamboi, their significance to potable water provision is insignificant since the water services they provide for the village is below the CWSA planning standards for a population such as Bamboi, over five thousand (5,000) people.

“The population of Bamboi requires the standard Small Town and Village Water System per the CWSA standards [...]” (Government Staff 2, fieldwork 2022).

Meanwhile, the village is surrounded by eight non-functional and two (2) functional GoG and NGO provided boreholes scattered across the populated areas of the village. The Bole District Assembly is not oblivious of this situation. A Key Informant narrated the authority’s awareness of the potable water situation in Bamboi:

“Per the estimation of the standards we work with, each population of three hundred requires a borehole with fitted handpump. Do the calculation and see [interactively quizzing me]. If the population is estimated at 5,000 and there are ten boreholes in the village, it means that over 2,000 people in the village do not have access to a potable water source. Meanwhile, the Assemblyman has reported that most of these boreholes are not even working. Clearly, you can say that Bamboi is having a water infrastructure problem.” (Government Staff 3, fieldwork 2022).



Figure 30: Sample of non-functioning boreholes scattered across Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork (2022/23).

The mismatch in population and water infrastructure dynamics sheds light on the overall technical, financial and political actions that relate to the unnatural scarcity of water resources for use, resulting in what villagers describe as “*stress without solution*”. To suffice this, a Key Informant shared his opinion on the potable water situation in the village:

“[...] even the ones that are in the village are not working. When you walk around, you will see all of them. Money to repair them is one problem. When you get the money, getting the skilled people to repair them is another problem. The District Assembly [local government] trained about seven village residents, but it is just basic skills to tighten handpump screws and others. When the challenge is complex, they are unable to fix it. We

usually require people from Wenchi [a town in the next administrative region]” to fix them. We will go through all the stress to get the problem fixed, however, in less than three months, the users will report the same problem or another [...]. The users cannot be blamed because the people using the boreholes are above the capacity for its operation”. (KII 10, fieldwork 2023).

These breakdowns highlight the technical, financial, and political dimensions of “unnatural” water scarcity, scarcity produced not by hydrology but by governance capacity gaps. They also expose tensions between national reporting and local reality. GoG figures from MWHWR (2010) claim that more than one-third of Ghanaians have access to potable water, contributing to progress toward the MDGs (now SDGs). However, such national-level reporting sits uneasily beside the realities of places like Bamboi, echoing broader scholarly concerns about mismatches between SDG metrics and everyday experiences (Egan and Agyemang, 2019).

5.1.2 Water safeguarding

This section introduces the safeguarding of water resources in Bamboi – a theme explored extensively in Chapter Six, where the village’s localised worldviews and cosmovision are unpacked in detail. Here, the focus is on how surface water safeguarding, particularly of the BVR (Nnaa Moo), is enacted in everyday practice. In Bamboi’s worldview, the BVR is regarded as the “*parent*” of all water sources, embodying both physical and non-physical (spiritual) dimensions that require protection.

The water safeguarding of Bamboi is rooted in its local cosmological understandings, shaped historically through taboos, totems, and mystical associations linked to the BVR and passed down

through the Koorafon¹⁶ lineage. Within this cosmovision, the river possesses supernatural authority capable of reciprocating human actions by rewarding respectful behaviour and reprimanding transgressions. This reciprocal relationship necessitates ongoing acts of reverence and restraint. To remain on the “positive” side of this relational exchange, the village performs two key rituals: a mandatory annual purification, and spontaneous cleansing rituals triggered by specific incidents. Both rituals occur through an off-river medium or idol, reinforcing the belief that physical and spiritual realms are intertwined.

Alongside ritual practice, tabooing and totemic prescriptions guide behaviour at the riverbank, regulating how people fetch water, bath, fish, or travel on the BVR. These measures function both as expressions of gratitude and as preventive mechanisms intended to avert misfortune that may arise from human violations, whether intentional or accidental. The safeguarding actions are led by the Mokooro¹⁷ (water priest), a spiritual custodian from the Koorafon, who performs these responsibilities on behalf of the Koorafon gate and the wider village. Such spiritual governance of water is not unique to Bamboi; similar traditions are documented across Ghana (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013).

This section also highlights a key gap in the IWRM framework. Whilst IWRM emphasises formal participatory structures including committees, quotas, and gender representation, the actual decision-making spaces in Bamboi remain informal, situated, and cosmologically anchored. Rather than flowing through WATSAN committees or other state-sanctioned bodies, authority is exercised through kinship networks, gate systems, ritual leadership, and spiritual obligation. What appears as “participation” in formal policy terms therefore obscures the intersectional dynamics

¹⁶ In Chapter six, I have discussed the *Koorafon* and other family gates that make the Mo ethnicity in Bamboi.

¹⁷ In Chapter Six, I discuss who *Mokooro* is and what he represents in Bamboi’s Water Safeguarding Priesthood.

such as age, kinship status, economic standing, social perception, and spiritual authority that determine whose voices carry weight in water decisions.

The rest of this chapter builds on this insight by examining how intersectional factors shape inclusion and exclusion across the village's two water-decision systems: water service provision and water safeguarding.

5.2 Processes of everyday decisions in Bamboi

Understanding the processes of everyday water decisions in a local setting is an essential part of the governance of water resources. Whilst significant amount of water decision-making at the village level in Bamboi revolves around 'preserving' the physical and spiritual nature of the BVR, the decisions are often problem-centric and involves different groups of actors at different stages. A Key Informant revealed the following narrative to situate why water decision-making in Bamboi is problem-centric:

“Yε te nsuo ho nso yε di nsu kɔm”, literally, “we stay by ‘abundant’ water, but we are water thirsty” (KII 3, fieldwork 2022).

Regardless, other sources of water such as the privately owned mechanic boreholes (water vendors), streams, ponds, rainwater, wells, and household boreholes, are guided by different arrangements that are liable to everyday changes and adapt to the overall decision climate and trends in the village and that of Ghana. In the next section, I unpack the factors that matter to the processes of water decisions in Bamboi and how they uniquely embody the type of water system. These processes unveil the gendered and intersectional dynamics of water access and control.

5.2.1 What factors matter?

Everyday water decision-making in Bamboi varies according to the type of water system involved. The intersectional dynamics governing access to the BVR differ markedly from those that shape access to privately operated water-vending points. For example, black pots (whether naturally dark or darkened by firewood) and menstruating women are prohibited from accessing the BVR; yet these restrictions hold no relevance at private vending points. What may superficially appear to be a minor rule of access, therefore, has deeper implications for who is included or excluded in water decision-making along gendered lines. This was made explicit by a local water leader from the Koora family gate:

“[...] until the spiritual sanctifications of the river became off-river due to an incidence that happened during the on-river event some time ago, only males could join the annual on-river sanctification. This because we tabooed females from accessing the river during their menstruation, not to talk of during such sanctifications. Since we could not be sure of their availability [availability here means not-menstruating] when there is the dire need to go onto the river [especially in the case of the spontaneous sanctifications], our predecessors decided to exclude females.” (KII 3, fieldwork 2023).

As the narrative by KII 3 shows, what begins as a taboo on access culminates in a broader exclusion from critical decision-making rituals, including the annual and spontaneous sanctifications discussed in Chapter Six. Whilst gender is often foregrounded in discussions of equality, it is only one facet of a wider set of intersectional experiences that shape water governance in Bamboi. For instance, menstrual exclusion declines as women age; once women reach menopause, the barrier dissolves. This makes older women more valued in safeguarding roles than younger women. The prominence of Koora Yaa Kumah (water priestess) and Naa Tiyaa (traditionalist and oral historian)

demonstrates how age, gender, and spiritual authority intersect. Although some ritual activities still exclude all women, older women wield significant influence, highlighting the fluidity of gender constructions in many African contexts

Beyond gender and age, family affiliation to the Koora gate determines access to core sanctification activities, including the precursor sacrifices performed before the mandatory annual ritual. Blood ties grant potential inclusion, yet this is only part of the inclusion criteria.

In practice, decisions about the timing of sanctifications and other major development issues are shaped by a small group of economically influential residents and non-residents who form the Development Committee (discussed in Section 5.3). Thus, even though public custom locates custodianship with the Koora family, hidden layers of power reveal additional intersectional exclusions. As one Key Informant explained:

“In as much as the previous yearly sanctification of the ‘Adre’ [BVR] has usually been May-June thereabout, that is not how it is supposed to be done. It should be done in the beginning of the year. However, we require a fat white ram/sheep for the process. Until someone donates the ram/sheep by benevolence or through a thanksgiving donation [a common practice of people who seek assistance through the BVR/Nnaa Moo], we are limited.” (KII 2, fieldwork 2023).

Reflecting on this narrative by KII 2 draws attention to the untold reality that the donor’s capacity to fund the ram thus determines ritual timing, demonstrating how economic status becomes a decisive intersection.

These dynamics were further exposed during Bamboi’s engagement with three Ghanaian-led “foreign” mining companies in early 2023. Beyond concerns about land degradation and pollution

of the BVR, the politics of royalties revealed that participation in the village’s water decisions was shaped not solely by Koora affiliation, but also by economic influence, social position, and political connections. Although the village has formal governance structures – including a chieftaincy and an elected Assemblyman under the Local Government Act, 2016 (936)¹⁸ – royalty payments were initially received by a former Assemblyman¹⁹, bypassing established authorities and “whitewashing” the environmental and social implications of small-scale mining. These events illustrate Wyatt et al.’s (2022), Steady’s (2005) and Foucault’s (1983) insights that power is dispersed, circulating through multiple social channels rather than residing exclusively in formal institutions or wealth.

Shifting from river-specific rules to everyday water decisions more broadly, access to individual boreholes, wells, rainwater, and private mechanised taps reflects additional intersectional dynamics. Unlike the BVR, no private tap owner restricts menstruating women’s access. However, gender norms manifest differently: adult men are generally not expected to fetch water publicly for domestic use, and when they do, they are permitted to bypass queues. Older women also enjoy this privilege, whereas younger women do not. Whilst pricing is not gender-differentiated, these practices reveal a gendered hierarchy of respect and labour expectations that privileges adult men and older women over others.

These examples illustrate why focusing solely on “gender inequality” is analytically insufficient. The advantages and disadvantages experienced by residents emerge from the intersections of

¹⁸ Local Government Act, 2016 (936):

https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=1635d379e2a21601611ffe0079da3434ea0cf1c102a0f928ad31eae488585e2JmltdHM9MTc1Njk0NDAwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=3cafca4b-f606-65a9-2bf3-d922f75e64fa&psq=Ghana+local+government+act+2016&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly9sZ3MuZ292LmdoL3dwLWNvb3RlbnQvcGx1Z2lucy9kb3dubG9hZC1hdHRhY2htZW50cy9pbmNsdWRlcy9kb3dubG9hZC5waHA_aWQ9NDkzMA&ntb=1

¹⁹ He did not have any formal legal nor customary locus.

gender, age, kinship, economic standing, social reputation, and spiritual authority. Consequently, decision-making in Bamboi – whether about river sanctification or access to private water points – is governed by fluid, overlapping, and context-specific intersections that continually reshape power and participation.

The next sections detail the specific intersectional factors that shaped decision-making during this ethnography and how they interact to include or exclude different actors across the village's water governance systems.

5.3 Intersecting matters and stories in decision-making

This section foregrounds the fluid and relational nature of inclusion and exclusion in Bamboi's water decisions. Intersectionality treats social positions (sex, gender, age, kinship, ethnicity, religion, class, migration status, etc.) as mutually constitutive, not additive; each position reshapes the meaning and effects of the others (Misra et al., 2024; Collins, 1998). Hence, I avoid the common pitfall of assuming uniform advantage/disadvantage within any single category (Misra et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2022; Mandel and Semyonov, 2016). For analytic clarity, I follow Collins and Bilge's (2020) emphasis on inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice as orienting themes.

I engage the intersectional analysis from intra-categorical and inter-categorical lenses (McCall, 2005). Intra-categorical analysis probes differences within a nominal group (for example, among women or among men); inter-categorical analysis compares between groups (for instance, women and men). Figure 31 visualises these distinctions, and Figure 32 maps the intersectional categories most salient in Bamboi's waterscape.

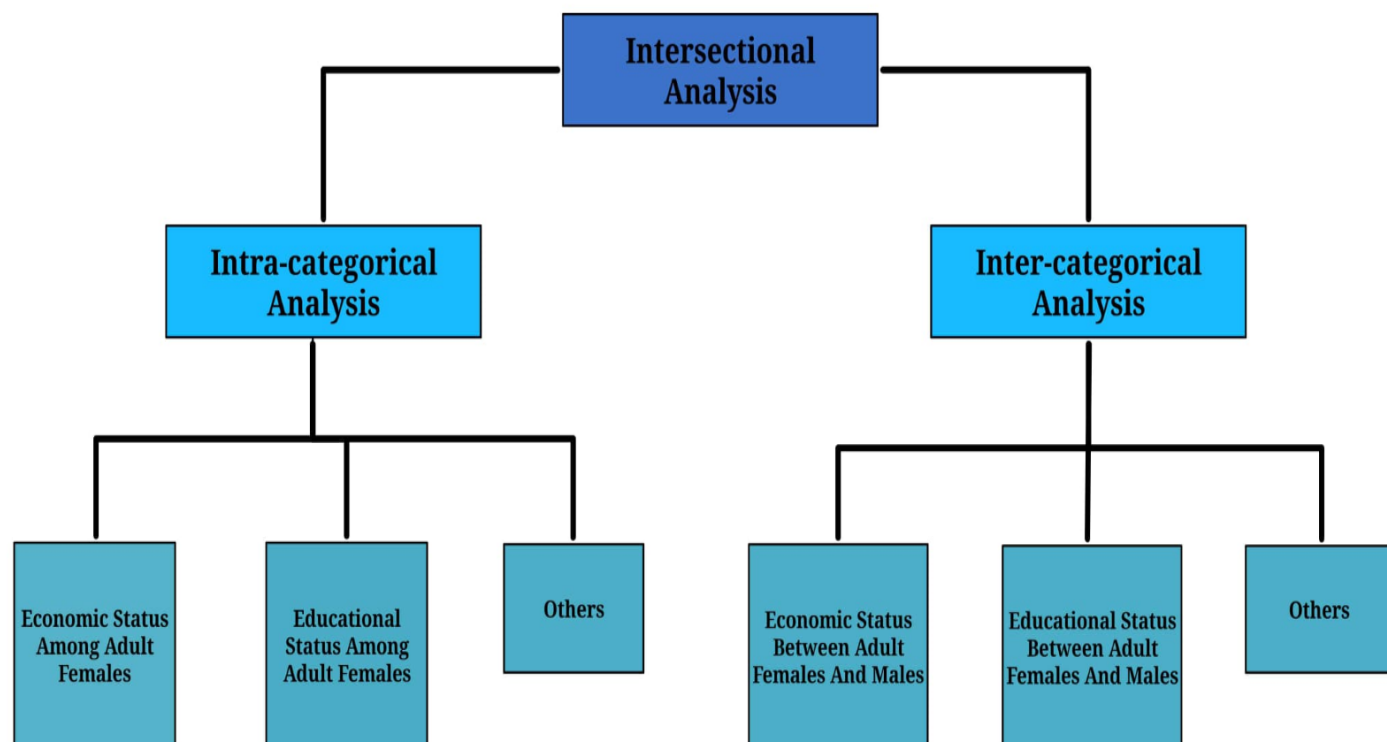


Figure 31: Intra and inter intersectional analysis categories

Source: Author's construct.

As Chapter Four shows, proximity to cosmological authority (such as Koorafon membership) can move an individual – say, a male Koora resident – closer to key decision spaces around the BVR, authorising certain interpretations of the river's identity, agency, and safeguarding. For instance, whilst a Bamboi resident's ethnicity as Mo can shape their proximity to the sanctification of the BVR, having multiple layers of identities such as a male Koora resident in Bamboi may grant access to multiple cultural contexts that situate him closer to the localised water decision-making spaces. By extension, the proximity of the male Koorafon to the water priesthood fundamentally shapes how he engages with the BVR, particularly in framing the river's identity and safeguarding through locally embedded cosmologies. As discussed in Chapter Four, such proximity enables certain actors, such as KII 2 to interpret the BVR's bodily and spiritual connection to Bamboi not through the dominant scientific lens found in mainstream literature, but as a form of spiritual

legitimacy grounded in cosmological worldviews. This exemplifies intersectionality's relational production of authority and meaning (Collins and Bilge, 2020).

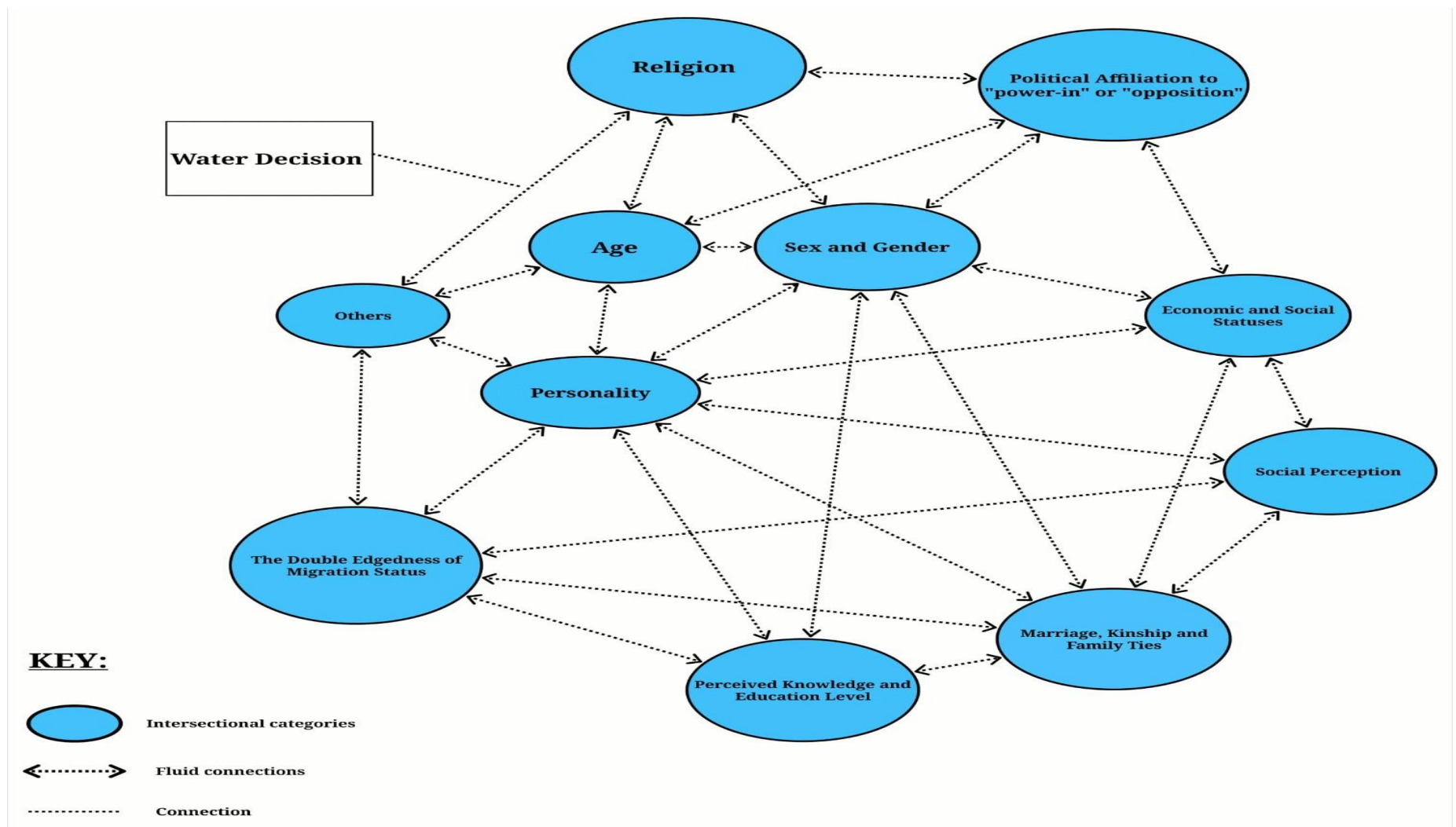


Figure 32: Fluid intersectional categories in water decision-making in Bamboi

Source: Author's construct.

The rest of this section moves beyond the theoretical reflections on intersectionality to unveil the empirical realities that interplay in the everydayness of water decision-making in Bamboi. I make inferences to scenarios in the period of the ethnography, where decision-making about a source of water became a matter of public interest and the spiral of social participation that unpacked in such a scenario.

Whilst the UN frames water as a human right (Langford, 2005), access in Bamboi remains a privilege, often mediated by purchasing power or convertible social capital. Decades after Gleick's (1998) warning about rural potable water deficits, many residents still depend on the BVR for domestic, commercial, and agricultural uses. Vulnerable households – especially the aged, sick, and poorest – turn to rainwater (in season) and the BVR despite anthropogenic contamination from small-scale mining (*galamsey* - Ghanaian jargon), solid and livestock waste through runoff, and detergent/soda pollution from laundry sites. For those with physical vulnerabilities, distance to the BVR multiplies the hardships of daily water access.

Although the challenge of access to water in Bamboi remains a problem and reveals the capacity challenges and priorities of the Government of Ghana, it triggers local adaptation strategies led by village actors and households. A brief narrative illustrates how kinship ties convert to water access: On one Tuesday morning in February 2023, we were on our way to a scheduled interview elsewhere in the village when we were stopped by a woman in her 70s. She lives about half a mile away from the BVR, Mofaga stream and Suukɔrl pond (the three main surface water sources in Bamboi, which are detailed in Chapter Four). She initiated an informal conversation about the borehole in her vicinity, her main source of water for domestic use, which had developed a fault in January that year. The fault had prevented it from flowing. It was revealed in this informal conversation that such faults are quite common with this borehole and others available for public

access and use in the village. Whilst expressing her worry, she narrated that she had engaged and negotiated with a former local government elected officer (Bamboi Assemblyman) in the village, who she shares family ties, to assist her in repairing the borehole when it had developed a fault in the previous year (November 2022). In the conversation, she revealed this:

“[...] in less than three months, it has broken down again [...]. When it broke in November last year, I pleaded with the former Assemblyman to fund repairs; he did – using part of the ‘galamsey money’ [referring to the mining ‘royalties’ from the prospective gold miners in the village]. I am his *sewaa* (aunt), so it was hard for him to refuse [...]. Yet many refuse to pay the Ghc 5 [equivalent to 55 pence] monthly fee, and when it breaks, they say they do not have money – though they buy from ‘*pipefɔɔ no hɔ*’ (pointing hands and referring to the private vendors) every morning.” (VR 10, fieldwork 2023).

Her account compresses multiple intersections: governance-produced scarcity (frequent breakdowns), collective-action frictions (fee evasion), political economy (mining “royalties” underwriting public repairs), and kinship-as-leverage (aunt-nephew obligation). Not every relative can mobilise such support, hence the need to resist essentialising intersectional claims (Misra et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2022; Misra, 2018; Mandel and Semyonov, 2016).



Figure 33: A village forum on the small-scale mining and matters arising in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

The next sections unpack the specific intersectional factors – age, sex, gender, marriage and kinship, economic status, education/knowledge, social perception and job status, migration, personality, religion, political affiliation, language, and others – that define who participates, who is heard, and who benefits across Bamboi’s dual decision arenas: water service provision and water safeguarding.

5.3.1 Age as a double-edged intersectional category

In Bamboi, age confers blessing and burden. Publicly, longevity is read as divine favour from Korowii/God, while premature death invites suspicions of “curse” or “misfortune” and ritual investigation. However, the value of old age is situational and relational: it hinges on health, cognition, personality, kin position, and perceived “usefulness”. In an informal conversation with a male farmer and ‘provision’ (usually a grocery shop) shop owner in his late 50s, he expressed the following narrative regarding the double edgedness of older age:

“[...] if you want accurate history of Bamboi, go to Naa Tiya [I have discussed her in Chapter Seven]...she is older than her sister [also assumed to be in her late 90s] but speaks clearly; her sister would ordinarily elongate and wind a simple conversation [...]” (VR 5, fieldwork 2022).

The narrative of VR 5 sharply compares two sisters who are both older. They share sex and gender but diverge in social authority because age and sex intersect with their ability and disposition. Mohammed (2023) advances similar argument on how gender can intersect with age and disability to define the lived experiences of some women. The idea of revering elders can also collapse into harm. Ghanaian cases of elderly abuse and witchcraft accusations – such as the assault on “Abena-ma,” an 86-year-old widow and resident of a rural village in northwestern Ghana (Akurugu, 2023), and the lynching of Akua Denteh, aged 90, at Kafaba near Salaga, Savannah Region of Ghana in July 2020 (Nkrumah-Pobi, 2024; Mohammed, 2023) – expose the fragility of “age as blessing”.

Regardless of the subjectiveness of VR 5’s contra-comparisons, everyday water practices, however, often privilege elders. At private vending points and public boreholes in Bamboi, older people –

women and men – commonly skip queues and may even draw water free. In an informal conversation with VR 1, who is a female in her 30s and the caretaker of one of the private water vendors, she narrated the following in relation to old age and queuing privileges:

“[...] aside men, older women too are not supposed to join queues to fetch water. In an ideal situation, an older person is not supposed to carry a bucket [a type of container] to draw water but if it happens, they can skip the queue and fetch immediately. If they cannot pay, they can take it for free [...]” (VR 1, fieldwork 2022).

Here, seniority can override gendered disadvantage, echoing settings where age accrues authority akin to masculinised privilege (Akurugu, 2021; Oyewumi, 1997). Thus, women enjoy masculine privileges as they grow older. Akurugu (2021) uses the scenario of the ‘deema’ (the local name for mother-in-law among the Dagaaba people of northwestern Ghana) to unpack how her role as the overall manager of the home of her son and his wife gives her power and privileges similar to traditional masculine roles such as determining how household income, including what is generated by the son’s wife (another female), is used for basic household needs such as food ingredients. Although the context in which Akurugu (2021) depicts ‘deema’ is in her role as mother-in-law and does not directly relate to her age, it is important to note that she gave birth to her son(s). This indicates that her masculine privilege comes with age/seniority.

Ritual domains intensify this pattern. Menstrual taboo frames younger and mid-aged women as ritually uncertain, while post-menopausal women are preferred for the cosmological sanctifications of the BVR. This is consistent with broader readings of menstruation as symbolic danger, shaping access to sacred waters and cleansing roles (Adomako, 2026; Gbogbo et al., 2025; Olaitan, 2025; Vancauwenbergh and Franco, 2024; Shaw, 2023; Montgomery, 1974). It highlights

the cultural logic through which older women's authority is legitimised. These constructions are not unique to Bamboi but reflect broader cosmological and cultural logics in which menstruation is understood as a source of spiritual or social risk. Such framings are often embedded in local moral orders that prescribe who may approach a river, fetch water at times, or perform cleansing rituals. Although these norms can have exclusionary effects (Olaitan, 2025), they also frame water as not merely a physical resource but a spiritual entity whose wellbeing requires careful moral and ritual negotiations Adomako (2026). These culturally situated and complex gendered exclusions reflect the weaknesses in the gender mainstreaming aspects of the IWRM.

Age in Bamboi is a mobile axis of power which can dignify, exclude, or expose, depending on how it intersects with sex, kinship, bodily status, and the political economy of water. These patterns illustrate that gender is not a fixed attribute of women or men but a relational system that allocates authority through institutions, norms, and everyday practices, hence, age can recalibrate (rather than replace) gendered hierarchies depending on how it intersects with lineage, embodiment, and local authority structures. Read through an African feminisms and intersectionality lens, "elder status" functions as a context-specific axis of power that may masculinise older women's authority while simultaneously diminishing some men's influence, confirming that inclusion/exclusion in water governance is produced through multiple, situated positionalities. This resonates with Oyewumi's (1997) arguments that African gender orders are seniority-indexed, in which age and status reorganise power beyond Western female/male binaries.

5.3.2 Sex and gender in shaping intersectional experiences

In this section, I extend the earlier discussion on age by examining how sex and gender identities intersect with other factors to shape people's stakes in water-related decision-making in Bamboi.

Although northern Ghana is broadly patriarchal (Adongo et al., 2023), and Bamboi reflects this structure, my findings show that sex and gender alone does not fully explain the patterns of exclusion and inclusion that characterise local governance. Sex remains a powerful organising principle that shapes expectations of what individuals – particularly women – can or cannot do. However, as the broader literature warns, ending the analysis at sex-based differentiation is reductive. In Bamboi, sex and gender intersect with other positionalities to produce unequal experiences among both men and women.

Whilst gender scholarship often implies that all men hold power, everyday decision-making in Bamboi contradicts this generalisation. Some men are marginalised by virtue of age, lineage, economic status or other intersectional attributes, while some women exercise influence within specific relational or socio-cultural domains. Nevertheless, sex continues to be a basis for excluding women from key decision spaces. For example, although the WATSAN Committee includes both men and women – as required by local government gender-representation policy (CWSA et al., 2010) – the Development Committee (DC), which wields substantially greater influence over water decisions, is composed exclusively of men. Deeper reflection of the all-men composition of the DC portrays that men lead ‘serious actions in the village. This reflected in the village responses to urgent matters such as the February 2023 mobilisation against illegal small-scale mining, where leadership was visibly masculinised. These insights reveal that participation in Bamboi is less a matter of formal representation than of gendered, intersecting power relations that quietly but consistently shape whose voices can shape water governance.

The gendered boundaries were also evident during fieldwork. A Haritinafon elder, after describing the ritual processes involved in land sanctification in Bamboi, concluded with the statement:

“[...] you [referring to me] are a female, else, I would have invited you to observe it next time so that you can also write about it.” (KII 14, fieldwork 2023).

This comment did not merely reflect my positionality as a researcher; it revealed an entrenched exclusionary rule – one that would apply even to a female descendant of the Haritinafon. Access to certain sacred decision-making spaces is thus structurally foreclosed to women, irrespective of lineage or status. Such exclusions make clear that in Bamboi, gender operates not merely as identity but as a structural boundary that decisively governs who may enter the most consequential spaces of water-related decision-making. These dynamics expose how gender functions as a deeply embedded axis of power, regulating women’s access to authority even when other intersectional advantages – such as lineage – might otherwise grant them entry.

5.3.3 Marriage, kinship and family ties in shaping intersectional experiences

In this section, I deconstruct sex, gender, and age to illuminate how marriage, kinship, and family ties reposition men and women differently in Bamboi’s everyday water-related decision-making. Marriage is a particularly potent axis of positioning. Within the Koora gate (the custodians of Bamboi’s water stewardship), a woman who marries into the lineage becomes a potential mother of a future River Priest or Priestess. Although this possibility is prospective, the present marital link itself grants proximity to water governance. For instance, the wife of the Mokooro (Water Priest) occupies an advantageous position in shaping his perspectives on village water matters, compared to women married outside the gate, because kinship-embedded authority is fundamental to water governance in Bamboi. In an interview with a Key Informant, he narrated the following:

“a wife can influence a husband’s decisions, so we encourage our young men from royal lines in the village to marry from the Mo ethnicity [...] I hope you understand [quizzing me]” (KII 1, fieldwork 2023).

Whilst interpersonal dynamics may influence the extent of such spousal influence, marriage nonetheless provides an accessible relational pathway through which women can enter water-related discussions indirectly.

Beyond the Koora gate, marital status similarly shapes other women's proximity to decision spaces. A palace council's wife, for example, narrated her leadership across several initiatives, including church organisations and the *Nontoma* –and explained that her husband frequently refers her for roles requiring female representation, citing both her competence and their shared social standing. In a Key Informant interview, she narrated the following:

“[...] I am involved in many activities and initiatives including Nontoma [a skilled centre in the village]. I am also involved in church activities such as being the Chair of [...] in the whole Bole District [calling her daughter to bring her leadership citations and documents from her room for me to see]. [...] Look at these citations [showing me series of certificates and end-of-service citations]. I am committed to what I do that is why I am referred for these roles [...] it is not just because my husband is a village elder [...]. He believes in my abilities so when he must recommend me somewhere, he does so with the hope that I will deliver.” (KII 7, fieldwork 2023).

Her account highlights how marriage can serve as a conduit to visibility and participation, particularly when reinforced by demonstrated capability and social recognition. She further noted that the in-laws' association within her husband's gate provides significant social capital through mutual support, referrals, and collective responsibility, revealing how marital networks consolidate women's embeddedness in local governance and relations. She revealed the following to that effect:

“[...] if one of us [referring to the in-laws association] is bereaved or in a situation, we contribute to provide a quota of food, drinks and water, in addition to our physical presence and services to support that member. Due to this relationship as in-laws, when someone loses the husband [the basis of the person’s membership in the in-laws’ association], the widow does not want to leave the group” (KII 7, fieldwork 2023).

However, such networks can also constrain women’s agency, especially when the social benefits of gate-based marital belonging discourage women from exiting harmful unions – a dynamic observed widely in African feminist critiques of patriarchy, kinship, and obligation (for example, Nnaemeka, 2004; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

Moreover, marriage is not only inclusionary for women; it also shapes men’s prospects. In an informal discussion with a group of four young Mo men between 20 and 30 years, one explained that his parents discouraged him from marrying outside Bamboi or beyond specific ethnic boundaries because doing so could undermine his eligibility for future chieftaincy or water priesthood, roles which are tightly anchored in kinship purity, lineage continuity, and communal trust. He was told that a non-Mo wife might influence his decisions in ways incompatible with the responsibilities of such sensitive roles – illustrating that marital alliances are scrutinised as potential conduits of external influence. He shared the following narratives:

“[...]. Sister Vivian [referring to me], it is not like I do not want to marry outside Bamboi [oo]. I had a girlfriend who was from [...mentioned an ethnicity in northern Ghana] but because I am a royal at both my maternal and paternal sides, we could not advance the relationship into a marriage since my parents kept repeating how marrying outside Bamboi, especially a woman from [...he made a list of Ghanaian ethnicities] can affect my right to be an elder or a village chief in the future [...].” (Participant C, fieldwork 2023).

These narratives situate marriage and kinship in Bamboi as relational embodiments of power which define voice, legitimacy, and access in water governance through embedded norms of belonging and influence. They further mirror broader patterns across Ghana where kinship, lineage boundaries, and marital choices shape men's political and ritual authority (Akurugu, 2021; Lentz, 2006), demonstrating the intersectional nature of gendered authority that African feminisms identify as central to understanding resource decision-making in non-Western contexts.

5.3.4 Perceived knowledge and education level in intersectional experiences

“Being conscious of how power and politics operate in decision-making, I paid close attention to cues indicating who and what drives authority in ‘important’ spaces such as the Chief’s palace. One palace elder, who had previously approached me about my research, dominated the discussion that day and intermittently inserted English phrases into the deliberations” (Fieldnote #2, fieldwork 2022).

This early observation provides an entry point into unpacking *perceived knowledge* and *education* as intersectional categories shaping authority in Bamboi. Here, perceived knowledge – rather than gender – determined who was invited into decision-making spaces at certain moments. During the village’s galamsey crisis, for example, I was repeatedly called upon to “advice” between drilling groundwater or constructing a treatment plant on the BVR, accompanied by the refrain, “*na Doctor, wei wo dwene ho sen?* (Literally, so Doctor, what do you think about this?).” To such elders, I was a prospective ‘Doctor’ and must know these things. My sex and the associated Bamboi’s constructions (gender) did not mean much here but my scholarly identity and assumed technical knowledge granted me proximity to water decision-making, despite my clear insistence on having

no geological engineering expertise. This dynamic aligns with intersectionality's recognition that power is relational and situational rather than fixed (Misra et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2022).

A similar pattern emerged among local actors. One council of elders' member – despite not belonging to the Haritinafon, the land-custodian gate – maintains control over sensitive village documents because the palace perceives him as more capable of handling legal and archival matters. He narrated this:

“[...] wait and let me bring them [village documents; archives on BVR, land titles, court sermons, and colonial administrative maps of northern Ghana etc.] for you to see [...] I have kept them for a very long time. I have been following up the court cases related to the [...mentioned an ethnic group] people claiming some small villages that belong to Bamboi. [...] I have held them for a long time without much opposition from other people in the palace because they know I can keep them safe and follow the litigation processes better [he pauses to sip a liquid from his silver cup]”. (KII 1, fieldwork 2023).

His authority reflects the weight given to competencies that the village recognises and values, reinforcing how knowledge – real or assumed – can override kinship-based entitlements. However, the same category can produce the opposite effect: the elder in Fieldnote #2, whose strategic use of English indexed educational status, was often avoided in deliberations for being “intimidating” and likely to “hijack the whole process”. This was revealed in an informal conversation with VR 5:

“[...] as for [...mentioned the name of the elder], that is what he does when he sees new faces. He would want to portray he is intelligent. That is why sometimes the elders avoid

him in important issues by waiting for him to travel outside the village, else he will hijack the whole process” (VR 5, fieldwork 2022).

The contradiction between KII 1’s inclusion and the other elder’s avoidance demonstrates that perceived knowledge operates as an ambivalent axis of power – capable of enabling authority or triggering strategic exclusion – thereby reinforcing the fluid, context-dependent nature of intersectional positioning (Misra et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2022). These dynamics reveal how knowledge itself becomes gendered through socially recognised performances of authority. Butler (2004) argues that gender is performative rather than fixed, constituted through repeated acts that signal credibility, competence, or legitimacy. In Bamboi, perceived knowledge operates as a performative act: it temporarily suspends – or, conversely, reinforces – gendered expectations depending on how the village interprets a person’s social cues. For instance, my scholarly identity and the elder’s strategic use of English both function as what West and Zimmerman (1987) describe as “doing gender,” where individuals enact behaviours that align with, challenge, or exceed normative gender arrangements.

Consistent with African feminist critiques (Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 1997), these performative functions are not universally empowering: their effects are relational and embedded in local epistemologies about who can legitimately “know” or speak. In this sense, authority in Bamboi is not simply gender-neutral; rather, it is mediated by gendered assumptions about competence, humility, and respectability, demonstrating how knowledge – like gender – is socially constructed, contextually negotiated, and differentially rewarded. These further unpacks how knowledge – like gender, age, and kinship – is neither uniformly empowering nor uniformly marginalising, setting the stage for examining how other social categories similarly produce shifting, situational forms of authority in the everyday governance of water in Bamboi.

5.3.5 Economic and social statuses in shaping intersectional experiences

In this section, I further deconstruct the intersectionality of actors along the lines of economic and social statuses. Economic and social statuses in Bamboi operate through locally recognised forms of financial generosity rather than Western class categories. Here, economic status denotes an actor's capacity to contribute – voluntarily or otherwise – to collective village initiatives. Purchasing power is therefore a salient axis of authority: those perceived as financially capable are routinely drawn into decision-making, particularly when issues require immediate material support. Over time, this pattern of giving consolidates both economic and social status. For instance, the leader of the Zakat Foundation – whose organisation has supported several water-related services – has accrued significant social legitimacy, often affirmed through everyday expressions such as: *“Alhaji Salia has helped us [oo] ... if it was not for him, we would not have gotten [a list of various social services].”*

However, economic status does not uniformly translate into interest in, or commitment to, water governance. Because water decisions in Bamboi are problem-driven – often emerging during episodes of scarcity – those with private water infrastructure may opt out of collective deliberations. For example, in an informal conversation with a middle-aged man who was present during one of the village gatherings on the potential demerits of the prospective (illegal) small scale mining on the BVR, he narrated the following narrative to distant himself from the potential implications in the future due to his (economic) ability to provide his household a borehole system with a 1000 litres detached storage:

“[...] if they [the dominant opinion during the meeting] *want to allow the mining on the water*, [BVR], that is fine. I do not care. It is not my water [referring to his hand-dug

borehole] they will be polluting [...] even before the drought season of every year, I fill my tanks [the 1000-litre storage] but some of them supporting the *galamsey* over there, it is the BVR they use, including drinking.” (VR 11, fieldwork 2023).

His distancing highlights how economic capacity can diminish collective responsibility by enabling household-level self-provisioning. In contrast, actors such as the Zakat Foundation leader engage precisely because their economic resources bind them to broader village expectations. These divergent responses among individuals with similar purchasing power underscore the fluidity and situational nature of intersectional experiences (Misra et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2022).



Figure 34: Samples of individual water supply with multiple storages in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork (2022/2023).

5.3.6 Social perception in shaping intersectional experiences

Individual and group engagement in Bamboi is deeply shaped by the cumulative social perceptions the village holds about a person or family. Over time, these perceptions sediment into a form of social currency that influences how individuals relate to others and how others respond to them. As a result, many residents carefully curate their public interactions to project “prestige” and avoid associations that could attract ridicule or suspicion. Hence, certain misfortunes, particularly those perceived as unpreventable or cosmically triggered, can abruptly reposition individuals into demeaning social categories. For example, it is widely believed that parents of children with physical disabilities or special needs (such as deafness, Down syndrome, or autism) may have caused these conditions through past actions or transgressions.

This perception generates social avoidance: villagers often limit contact with such families to avoid inviting similar misfortune into their own lives. Likewise, when repeated catastrophes befall a household, the village may interpret these occurrences as evidence of witchcraft or negative supernatural forces, leading to the avoidance of individuals suspected of possessing such powers. These dynamics show that social perception operates as a powerful axis of intersectional inclusion and exclusion in Bamboi, setting the stage for examining how such perceptions intersect with other factors, including economic ability, kinship, and gendered authority, in shaping everyday water governance.

Although these interpretations are embedded in Bamboi’s specific cosmological history, they reflect broader patterns noted elsewhere. Cleaver and Hamada (2010) observe that communities often link everyday interactions to natural and supernatural forces that regulate social conduct.

Similarly, Dikito-Wachtmeister (2000) illustrates how fear of witchcraft shapes women's participation in public and water-related decision-making.

5.3.7 Fluid intersectional experiences shaped by ethnicity and migration

In this section, I focus on the ethnicity and the migration statuses of people and how that shape their everyday experiences in water decisions in Bamboi. Migration and ethnicity in Bamboi operate as double-edged axes of power: they can amplify authority and voice, or compound marginality, particularly in water decision spaces. Reading migration intra-categorically (within groups sharing a key ethnic identity) and inter-categorically (across groups) shows how status, education, kinship, spatial location, and stigma recalibrate who is invited, who speaks, and who decides.

The next paragraph focuses on the intra-categorical experiences of two Mo native return migrants living in Bamboi; Participant B and Matthew (signposted in Chapter Three). Return migration from Ghana's south to the north is popularly read as a sign of accumulated capital – economic resources, networks, and “superior” exposure (Darko et al., 2024; Bosiakoh et al., 2014; Van der Geest, 2011). In Bamboi, such capital often translates into being invited to public fora where water issues are pursued. For instance, in a group informal conversation, Participant B narrated the following in connection with his return migration and how that shaped his status and participation in the village's decisions:

“[...] when I completed University and returned home, I and other young guys were often called to participate in some issues that concern our town [...] In one of such instances, the chief's representative and Assemblyman asked me to join a team to follow-up our proposed village water system at New Longoro.” (Participant B, fieldwork 2023).

However, this same dynamic can entrench absentee leadership and procedural theatre. A village respondent revealed that:

“Things are not going on well with the village development as we expect because almost all the people that the palace elders and others will task to chair important initiatives in the village live outside the village and come occasionally. How can they be concerned with the problem they are tasked to oversee like those living within and suffering it? But who are you to oppose? They have travelled and have money” (VR 4, fieldwork 2023).

Village Respondent 4’s narration resonates with critiques of committee efficacy – that representational bodies seldom resolve infrastructural problems like water supply (Asamoah and Ile, 2024; Cleaver and Hamada, 2010).

On the flipside, returnees who come back without economic or skills capital – or with compromised health – can be socially de-selected. Matthew, a Mo native and former Bui Dam contract worker exemplifies this adverse pathway after an accident and business failure precipitated a decline in his status and mental health. In one of my regular informal conversations with a 52-year-old mother of six with two of them living outside Ghana, she narrated the following with respect Matthew:

“[...] you see that guy [referring to Matthew, her mentally challenged male neighbour assumed to be in his 40s], he was working on contract at the BPA during the construction of the Bui Dam but had an accident at work. He was compensated with a large sum of money but due to the misfortune and bad luck that followed him, he invested it into a bad business and lost everything. Those issues preceded his current mental health state [...]. Now, everyone has abandoned him, so he lives alone. If it were in his good days, his visits

would have been met with a funfair from his friends and relatives because he would have come along with foodstuff and money.” (VR 6, fieldwork 2023).

Although I could not engage Matthew on ethical grounds, his everyday life now includes fetching and carrying his own water as in Figure 35 (“Matthew carrying water on his head”) – an act that locally defies gendered norms. This reveals that whilst migration intersected with other factors to the inclusive advantage of Participant B, it was different for Matthew. Moving from the experiences of Participant B and Matthew, I unpack the inter-categorical of non-Mo migrants.



Figure 35: Randomly meeting Matthew carrying water on his head from the BVR one hot afternoon

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

Non-Mo residents such as the Dagaaba, Vagla, Sissala, Batorr, Akan, and Fulbe, do not experience migration uniformly. Proximate kinship histories can lubricate access. For instance, a Vagla pensioner who was a former teacher in Bamboi, traced his shared descent with Mo lineages. This is because the Vagla, just as the Mo, connect their ancestral histories to the Sissala ethnicity (I unpacked this relationship in Chapter Four). He recalled his active roles in Bamboi's development through a civil-servants' association:

“I travelled from my village [towards Bole town] to Bamboi in the 1990s when I was posted by the GES to teach here [...] we also belong here. The Vagla and Mo are descendants of Sissala. I can go anywhere I want in this village, and no one can stop me [with a sarcastic expression]. Who can stop me from talking about what I want to? When I was in active service [referring to teaching] in the village, all the Government of Ghana employees in the village formed an association to offer various support to the village's development. One was lobbying for water infrastructure and other social services for the village. We were able to get some boreholes for the village [...]. Due to transfer of some members and other issues at that time, we lost touch and enthusiasm. Now, I am a pensioner, so I am on break!” (KII 8, fieldwork 2023).

Here, migratory status is refracted through education and occupational prestige. This is because it is not every Vagla who would enjoy the same permeability of decision spaces. His narration also reveals that voluntary withdrawal from public deliberation can signify satiated needs, and not powerlessness. For example, he had access to reliable household water through a private mechanised system. This satiated need declines interest in communal water projects that are mobilised on needs.

In contrast, the Fulbe, who are also non-Mo just like KII 8 are historically and presently absent in spaces where decisions are made in Bamboi, including those related to water. Exploring the lived experiences of the Fulbe is eminent in this section due to their well-known migratory status across West Africa and how that is associated with the use or access to water and pasture for their herd of cattle, nomadic economy and households. The Fulbe are mainly nomadic settlers from the Sahel regions of Africa and found in Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Chad, Cameroon, Ghana, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and (south) Sudan (Oppong, 2017; Tonah, 2002).



Figure 36: The Fulbe men-dominated Cattle market on Saturdays at Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

Although non-Mo ethnicities such as the Dagaaba, Sissala, Vagla and Batorr have usually settled far from the native Mo gate houses (usually located at the centre of the village), the Fulbe settlements in Bamboi lie on the village's fringes, far from the village centre and its boreholes,

BVR or public taps. For instance, when I told my research assistant that we needed to visit the Fulbe in the village, he responded in the following narrative:

“Ei Sister Vivian, they live very far ooo. They live ‘farrrr’. They live in different parts of the village but all at the fringes. You would have to go after the Secondary Schools to find some whilst others live towards the fringes of Suukorl and some towards the Polyclinic [...]” (Raymond, fieldwork 2023).



Figure 37: The road to one of the “fringes” of the Fulbe settlements

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

The ethnography situates these peripheries within a broader pattern of nomadic minority spatiality (Nartey and Ladegaard, 2021). The nomadic Fulani often live as minority groups with respect to

power and population with their settlements mainly spatially separated from indigenes (Nartey and Ladegaard, 2021). The Fulbe's exclusion entwines with national-regional stereotypes of pastoralist conflict and resource competition (Boakye Gyan, 2021; Oghuvbu and Oghuvbu, 2020; Okoro, 2018; Bukari and Schareika, 2015; Tonah, 2002). The characteristic conflict associated with the Fulbe shapes their overall interaction and acceptance in many areas of Ghana, including Bamboi. For instance, I had noted the following narrative in my fieldnotes about the everyday stereotypes of some Fulbe as I observed in Bamboi:

“As I sat in front of the shop of a friend which is located at the rest-shops to chat and reflect on my work, I saw a seemingly tired Fulbe man approaching a local food vendor next to my friend's shop. In his interactions with the female food vendor, I noticed the usual derogatory utterances advanced towards the Fulbe in the village, just as it exists at several places I have been to in Ghana. Phrases like, ‘*herrr Fulani! ...hey Fula!*’ were constantly used in this economic interaction. What has he done wrong for purchasing food which he paid and must have even been comparatively served less? His crime; he is a Fulani!” (Fieldnote #1, fieldwork 2023).

Fieldnote #1 captures the encounter between a female Mo native and Fulani man. The derogatory address signals how an ethnic label can eclipse the gendered privileges a man might otherwise wield. This derogatory relationship translates into access to water sources by the Fulbe. To avoid humiliation at central water points (such as BVR and boreholes), many Fulbe self-divert to peripheral sources like Suukɔrl for domestic uses, even when the quality is inferior. The pattern echoes Swyngedouw's argument that public water regimes can disempower migrants/poor – a dynamic visible in peri-urban/urban Africa and adapted here to a large rural-commercial village (Swyngedouw, 2004; 1995).



Figure 38: A group of Fulbe women fetching water from the Suukorl while a herd of cattle drink on the other side

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

Regardless, migration status does not flatten internal differences, which are produced from the interplay of intra-categorical intersections. A KII with the Fulbe head underscored selective relational access:

“We are not allowed to take part in decisions at the palace, but when there is an urgent matter that I need to seek support from the Chief, he always opens his doors for me.” (KII 15, fieldwork 2023).

This door-opening is a male-coded privilege, mediated by Fulbe internal patriarchal leadership selection and long-term ties – advantages that do not cascade to Fulbe women or to most men across the group.



Figure 39: Two Fulbe women trading in a female-dominated business (dairy products sale) by the Fulbe in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

This section collectively reveals that migration status is neither a proxy for inclusion nor exclusion but a relational amplifier in Bamboi, that works through lineage, education/occupation, spatial location, nor stigma to shape who is represented, heard, and heeded in water governance. For Mo returnees, mobility can convert to influence; for others (such as Matthew), it can visualise vulnerability. For non-Mo migrants, especially the Fulbe, distance from the centre –socially and geographically – translates into distance from infrastructure and decision-making, with Suukorl pond symbolising a governance periphery. These patterned asymmetries advance the thesis’

decolonial FPE argument that universalist gender-mainstreaming checklists miss how “migration, ethnicity and place” configure authority and access.

5.3.8 The intersectional experiences shaped by personality

Personality shapes who speak, who is heard, and how authority travels across Bamboi’s decision-making terrains including ascribed roles (such as traditional rulers, water priesthood) to problem-driven arenas (public forums, the Development Committee).

I begin with the water priesthood, whose authority over the BVR (detailed in Chapter Six) is perpetually ascribed to men of the Koora gate but substantively secured through personal attributes. Selectors privilege traits that command respect, evoke “fear,” and signal a degree of “supernatural” potency; without these, the role risks social disregard. This is not merely symbolic: elders recall prior priests who publicly sanctioned infractions through temporary bans and fines, contrasting that era’s compliance with current laxity around the riverbanks. In a KII with an 85-year-old man in the village, he revealed the following:

“[...] people can now do anything around the river these days [nodding his head calmly]. During the time of the immediate former ‘*nsuowura*’ [referring to a water priest], who are you to defecate around the river? You dared not! If he caught you going against the rules of using the BVR, he could even ban you from using it for some time or charge you. [...] but today, you go to the river, and you feel embarrassed. Human faeces have paraded the banks of the river. I do not blame perpetrators [...] they have it cheap now” (KII 9, fieldwork 2023).

The implication is clear: personality, manifested as perceived charisma, moral force, and ritual authority, acts as a regulatory instrument for safeguarding²⁰ the BVR.

²⁰ Chapter Six interrogates this process in detail.

Outside ritual and customary roles, however, assertive public personas are risky. Everyday actors often mute strong opinions in meetings due to fear of social reprisals, gossip, or spiritual retaliation.

In an informal conversation with a 50-year-old Mo man, he revealed the following:

“[...]it is not that I do not want to speak in meetings oo. Those people sitting there, each of them has something to say but you can never tell who your words will offend. Do not be deceived by the smiles; some of them carry real malice. Before you realise it, a strange sickness or some catastrophe has befallen you. Things have happened in this village before, so everyone is cautious now” (Participant F, fieldwork 2023).

The revelations from Participant F were corroborated by a Key Informant that such anxieties routinely suppress open deliberation:

“In this town, people are afraid of each other, so they all pretend the in public. That is why the Bamboi is not progressing. People have ideas *paa* [exaggerating of excess] they are careful of gossip or spiritual attacks. I cannot blame them. There are things that have happened to people in this village which have come out as attacks from people they have offended in public encounters” (KII 2, fieldwork 2023).

These dynamics echo wider findings that beliefs about witchcraft and the supernatural can inhibit participation in collective water governance. For instance, Dikito-Wachtmeister (2000) reveals that the fears of being bewitched by other participants served as a factor that demotivated/excluded women from participating in decision making processes in rural water projects in the Makoni District of Zimbabwe.

Further, personality also co-assembles with economic and social status to pattern inclusion. As section 5.4.5 shows, financial capacity can open or close decision spaces; here, I spotlight the Development Committee to illustrate how personality, status and networks coproduce authority.

The DC is neither customary (like the water priesthood) nor formally constituted (like WATSAN). Its members are widely described as highly educated, financially secure, “difficult-to-reach,” and able to mobilise external networks for projects but not necessarily Mo natives. These attributes collectively produce a closed niche of influence. Access to the DC typically runs through palace elders, and even long-term residents report knowing only members’ names while acknowledging their decisive role in village matters. In an informal conversation with a group of men in their 30s, the following ensued:

Me: If I want to meet the Development Committee, how do I go about it?

Participant C: “If you want to meet them, unless you go to Nana [referring to the Chief Representative]. He may decide to send you to them.”

Participant D: “I have been in this village consistently for three years since I finished school, but I have only heard the names of some of the members, but I do not know them. Meanwhile, they take all the important decisions in the village”

Participant E: “They are like shadows [hahaha]. You will only see their traces, but you cannot see them in full” (Informal conversation, fieldwork 2022).

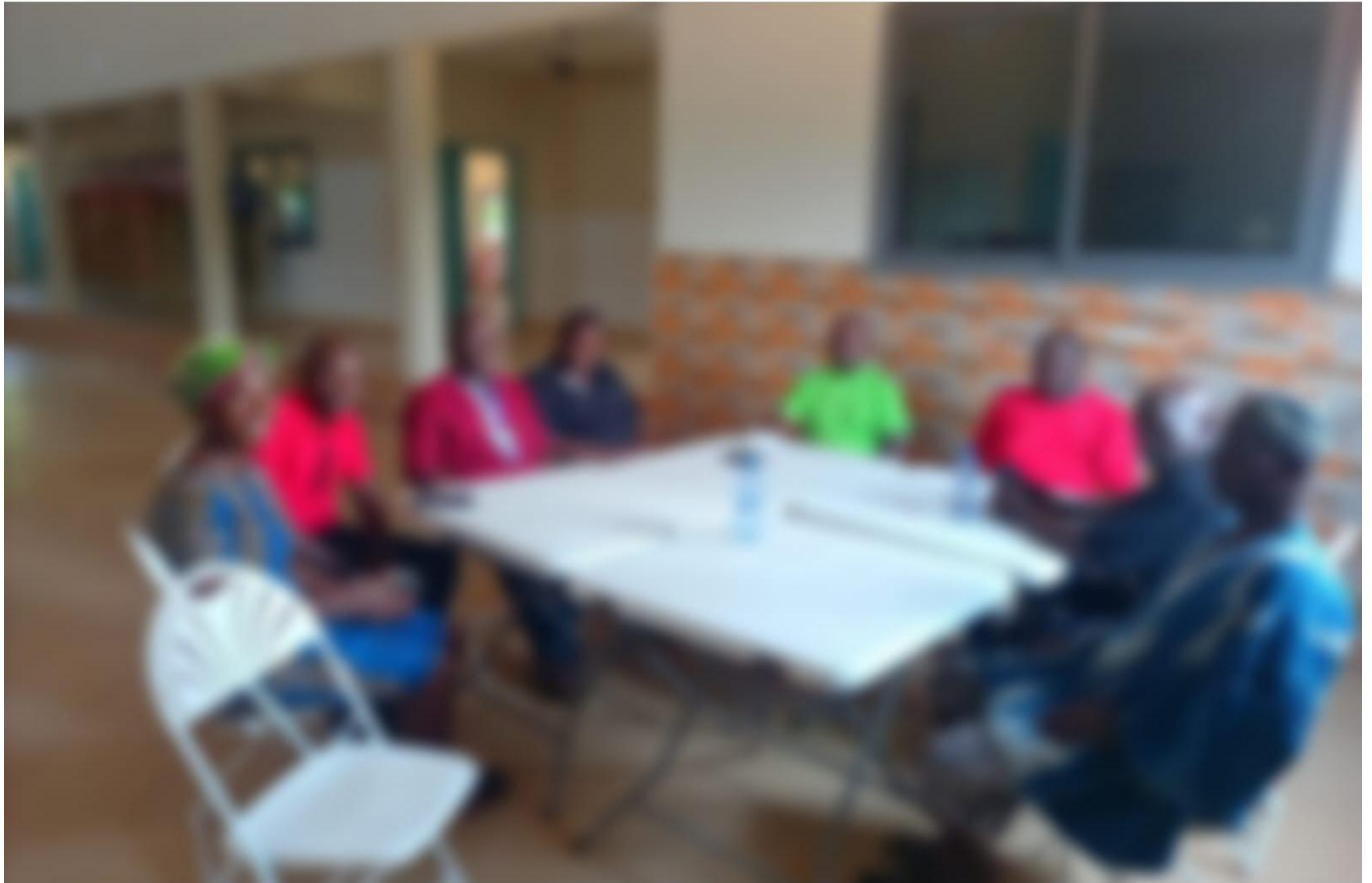


Figure 40: A “rare” opportunity of meeting members of the DC in one of their meetings

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

In practice, the DC has determined the use and control of mining “compensation” and “royalties,” eclipsing formal bodies such as WATSAN in the water governance. This pattern resonates with critiques that representative committees often fail to guarantee meaningful participation or equitable decision-making (Asamoah and Ile, 2024; Cleaver and Hamada, 2010). Personality in Bamboi is therefore not a neutral trait but an intersectional axis that, in combination with ritual legitimacy, social perception, and economic standing, configures who can enforce norms, who self-silences, and who quietly decides.

5.3.9 Religion in shaping intersectional experiences

This section further deconstructs the foregoing intersectional categories along the line of religion. In Ghana (and in Bamboi), Christianity, Islam, and traditional religions coexist, with the latter far more fluid in practice and leadership than the former two (GSS, 2021). In Bamboi's worldview, religion matters in two ways: they define people's self-selection into or withdrawal from ritual and cosmological governance spaces; and customary gatekeeping that mobilises religious identity to include or exclude actors from specific roles. Although kinship remains the harder rule in selecting the water priesthood, the river sanctification itself is 'traditional' and rooted in libation, animal sacrifice, invocation of ancestors, which places Christians and some Muslims in dilemmas of participation, while easing the pathway for declared traditionalists.

To understand how religion is an important intersectional category in Bamboi, two key informants illustrated the self-exclusion dynamic. One narrated the following:

“[...] we are also responsible for purifying the land. Each year, we delegate some young men to gather fowls from houses in the village to sacrifice at various sacrificing points [...] you know I am a Muslim [performing ablution as he spoke], so I am not supposed to lead in most of these rituals, so I plead with *Rasta* [a traditionalist] to support me” (KII 14, fieldwork 2023).

Another elder, a long-standing church leader, noted the strain of navigating Christian commitments with ritual obligations. He narrated the following:

“[...] I was a member and leader of the [...mentioned an international Church in Ghana] before becoming [...mentioned his role]. So, I find it difficult navigating my principles as a Christian and the rituals [libation, animal sacrifices and others] associated with this role” (KII 3, fieldwork 2022).

Informal conversations in the village also revealed that this “two-faced” religious positioning may dilute elders’ confidence and authority when supernatural invocations are expected. By contrast, Rasta – linked patrilineally to the Haritinafon (land) and matrilineally to the Koorafon (river) – cannot inherit the river priesthood (which follows the Koorafon patrilineal line), yet his traditionalist faith makes him a core participant in both land and river sanctifications; he routinely opened our conversations with libation, signalling cultural legitimacy and ritual ease.

These reflections reveals that religion in Bamboi does not operate as an individual attribute but as a relational institution that intersects with kinship and authority to structure who is invited to speak, act, and sanctify. Read through an FPE lens, these ritual spaces are part of the waterscape’s governance field, where power flows through socio-cultural norms and embodied practices; participation is therefore mediated by intersecting identities – religion and lineage – and not reducible to sex difference (Sultana, 2021; Truelove, 2019). Intersectionality framing of religion in Bamboi clarifies that Christian or Muslim affiliation can be a selective filter – enabling some men to lead “modern” water committees while disqualifying them from “traditional” sanctifications – producing differentiated inclusion among men and among women, rather than a simple male-female split (Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989).

5.3.10 Political affiliation to ‘power-in-power’ or ‘opposition’ in shaping intersectional experiences

The discursive nature of engagement in Bamboi mirrors Ghana’s broader partisan political landscape. Active partisan affiliation – defined not merely as enthusiastic support but as holding recognised local or national party roles, attending meetings, or contributing financially to party activities – functions as a significant axis of social power. In contexts where basic infrastructure such as water supply is lacking, the widespread belief that politically connected individuals can

lobby development initiatives becomes a potent social logic. Such actors are therefore routinely drawn into community decision-making spaces, particularly when their party occupies national office.

This strategic co-optation, although framed as inclusion, elevates these individuals to positions of heightened esteem, reinforcing their prestige and informal authority. However, this category of political affiliation does not operate in isolation; it intersects with kinship, seniority, and other socio-cultural markers to shape uneven patterns of exclusion and inclusion. An illustrative moment occurred during fieldwork after the funeral rites of the water priestess, Koora Yaa Kuma, when a dispute among palace elders culminated in the temporary relocation of customary stools to the household of a Yaarafon member who also served as a national officer of the then-ruling New Patriotic Party. Although several other Yaarafon elders were present and equally capable of safeguarding the stools, his partisan status had, over time, conferred a symbolic immunity and authority that rendered him the “ideal” custodian.

This episode exposes how political affiliation, when sedimented into everyday practice, becomes a decisive axis of power – capable of overriding traditional hierarchies and reshaping who is deemed trustworthy, influential, or capable of holding authority. Ultimately, it situates a central argument of this thesis: that participation in local water-related governance in Bamboi is never merely about formal roles or lineage, but about the dynamic interplay of intersectional markers through which power is constantly negotiated, asserted, and reproduced.

5.3.11 Other factors (such as language) in shaping intersectional experiences

The intersectional factors shaping who is heard in Bamboi’s water-related decisions are fluid, shifting with relationships, priorities, and events. Among these, language becomes pivotal. In a

Mo-speaking public sphere, the capacity of non-Mo residents to speak Mo confers an identity that temporarily transcends ethnicity and elevates their participatory standing over those without Mo proficiency. Because most public fora and deliberations default to Mo, non-Mo speakers are routinely marginalised unless organisers make explicit accommodations – exceptions that are discretionary rather than routine. For instance, one meeting on an impending artisanal mining licence switched into variants of Twi to enable my full participation; even then, the convenor signalled to exclude me through change of language, in a joking but assertive request:

“Dr [referring to me], as for this one, we will say it in Mo because we do not want you to hear [*hahaha*-laughing and nodding to prompt me that I should understand the rationale of switching the language]” (KII 10, fieldwork 2023).

This fluidity extends from public assemblies into customary spheres. In an interview with a key participant in the BVR sanctification rites, he explained that while multiple languages were once acceptable during rituals, a past theft which was traced through a spiritual inquiry to interlocutors who understood Twi triggered an injunction that all languages may be used except Twi:

“[...] at first [referring to over a decade], any language could be spoken during the rituals on the river. This openness resulted in the theft of some key ornaments that were used to idolise the river idol. We [referring to himself and others] engaged in a spiritual inquiry and found that the theft was not carried out by a Mo native but with some people who could understand the Twi language that was spoken. The medium/oracle we consulted instructed that the use of any language could be permitted on the river during rituals except Twi. So, anyone who uses Twi could face a threat of life. This has been the state of language use during the sacrifices since we received that instruction” (KII 2, fieldwork 2022).

The narrations of KII 10 and KII 2 illustrate the fluidity of language as an exclusion and inclusion mechanism in the whole continuum of public and customary engagements in the village's water decision-making processes. Language is not merely a medium in Bamboi; it is an allocative mechanism of power that can include by translation, exclude by default, or sanctify by prohibition. Its strategic deployment, whether to widen access, curate secrecy, or safeguard the sacred, demonstrates that participation is never guaranteed by presence alone but continuously produced through linguistic gatekeeping across public and ritual domains.

5.4 Conclusion of the chapter

This chapter addressed who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi by mobilising an African feminist and FPE-informed intersectional lens. It has revealed two things: highlighted the intersectional categories of exclusion and inclusion in Bamboi's water governance; and exemplified how these categories interact to produce and sustain positions of advantage and disadvantages in the village's decision-making. The chapter has shown that water decision-making is co-constituted by service provision (the state, NGOs, individuals and parastatal agencies such as the CWSA) and water safeguarding – which involves the protection of water's physical and non-physical forms anchored in Bamboi's cosmology and stewarded by the Mokooro/Koorafon. These domains organise authority, voice and legitimacy in everyday water practice in Bamboi. Against this institutional and cosmological backdrop, the chapter demonstrated that gender matters, but never alone. Drawing on intra- and inter-categorical intersectional analysis (McCall, 2005), it unpacked how age/seniority, sex and gender, kinship and marital ties, migration status, education, socio-economic position, ethnicity, partisan affiliation and others act singly and in concert to produce durable advantages and recurrent exclusions in the village decision spaces (Misra et al.,

2024; Wyatt et al., 2022; Ifejika Speranza & Bikketi, 2017; Mandel and Semyonov, 2016; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1989).

In doing so, the chapter decentred Western-centric simplifications of “women’s inclusion” (which has its history in WID approaches) as a proxy for gender justice by situating gendered participation as relational achievement – secured or withheld at the intersection of cosmology, kinship, seniority and politics – so that both women and some men are alternately enabled or silenced. This aligns with African feminisms and FPE framings on situated power and relational authority. Thus, Bamboi’s waterscape reveals FPE in practice: it shows that power over water is never reducible to gender nor to formal structures, but is produced through intersecting identities, cosmologies, and socio-political relationships that shape everyday water decisions in the village. Bringing African feminisms and intersectionality into dialogue with FPE, this chapter has advanced a decolonial feminist political ecology that exposes the limits of Western gender mainstreaming and demonstrates that control of the waterscape emerges through dynamic, relational, and context-specific configurations of power – affecting both women and men. Hence, any governance framings that treat “gender” as numerical representation, rather than as an entangled and place-based power, will misread how the waterscape is governed and by whom.

Whilst this chapter examines social and institutional interactions in everyday decision-making, the next (Chapter Six) extends the analysis into the realm of localised worldviews. It interrogates the cosmological, cultural, and spiritual understandings that shape water stewardship in Bamboi, revealing the layered interplay between customary authority, metaphysical beliefs, and state-led governance.

CHAPTER SIX

6 Localised worldviews and layers of (natural) water resource stewardship in Bamboi

6.0 Introduction

“M’awura, sɛ nsuo ho aɛm na wo ka a, di kan kɔ Mokooro hɔ. Wo ne no kasa wie a, wo bɛ tumi ne yɛn abɛ kasa”. Literally, “my lady, if you want to talk about water matters with us, first go to the Mokooro. After speaking with him, you can come back to speak with us.” (Palace elder, fieldwork 2022).

This directive marked my first encounter with the Bamboi palace elders when my native research assistant led me to introduce myself at the beginning of fieldwork. The elders comprise the Chief of Bamboi, the Queen Mother (Bamboi hankoorā), and the gate heads (or their representatives) of the six autochthonous Mo family gates: Haritinafon, Yaarafon, Koorafon, Vonboi, Suarafon and Jaagafon. Although gate headship is an automatic male position, each must be paired with a female representative – referred to as hankoorā in Mo or obaapanin in Asante Twi/Akan (a non-Mo language widely spoken in Bamboi. Chapter Three explains the linguistic dynamics that shaped the ethnography).

The Mokooro, referenced in the opening quotation, is the head of the Koorafon and automatically the water/river priest, while the Koorā Yaa Kuma (The gate name, Koorā, is the first name of each priestess) is the female gate head and water/river priestess. Although the Chief Regent is the overall head of the Bamboi traditional area, he defers to the water priests in matters concerning water – particularly the BVR and its safeguarding. His immediate compliance in directing me to the Mokooro, who was absent during my first visit, reflects this reverence and the spiritualised hierarchy surrounding water in Bamboi. This deference emerges from the cosmovision of Bamboi, where water is not merely a physical substance but a relational being with deep spiritual affinity

to the Koorafon – the gate believed to share a cosmic bond with water. As a result, other palace elders regard themselves as “strangers” to water matters and refrain from deliberating on issues of surface water without the Mokooro’s authorisation. This embodied ontology of water – as kin, ancestor, protector, and sentient force – cannot be understood if water is viewed solely in its material or hydrological form (Nowak et al., 2024; Cohen et al., 2023; Strang 2021; Kimmerer 2012).

This chapter therefore responds to the third research question on how local and customary institutions interact with formal water governance institutions by unpacking the indigenous ways in which water is locally constructed in Bamboi, how these constructions shape everyday water decision-making, and how these local worldviews intersect, coexist, or conflict with formal, Western-influenced governance frameworks such as the SDGs and IWRM. The analysis draws on FPE and (epistemological) cultural relativism to situate Bamboi’s governance practices within their decolonial, situated and culturally embedded meanings. In FPE, such localised and non-Western perspectives represent the subjectivities and lived relationalities that ground resource governance (Mollett et al., 2020; Elmhirst, 2015; Rocheleau, 2015). Similarly, cultural relativism foregrounds context-rooted interpretations of natural resources as legitimate alternatives to Western universalism (Ziai, 2025; Reagan, 2017). Recognising these perspectives helps illuminate why Westernised governance models often face cultural misfits and implementation challenges at the village level.

Against the above background, the chapter proceeds as follows. I begin with an account of my first encounter with the Black Volta River and how this shaped my initial understanding of Bamboi’s waterscape. The chapter then dives into Bamboi’s localised worldviews of water, detailing the spiritual, cultural, and cosmological meanings that water holds. It then examines the layers of

natural (water) stewardship, including the roles of the Mokooro, the Koorafon, and the wider customary governance systems. The rest will analyse how these localised worldviews interact with non-localised, formal governance frameworks, resulting in hybrid practices – what Cleaver (2002) conceptualises as institutional bricolage.

6.1 Water decision-making: the perspectives of localised worldviews

“Before the meeting started, one of the gate heads [the Haritinafon/landowners gate head] reminded the linguist that they have not poured libation. Quickly, the “Chief”²¹ whispered something²²– likely indicating where a bottle of Schnapp was kept – to the Haritinafon head. He then turned toward the north-western side of the palace, retrieved the bottle, and received the Chief’s nod of approval. The Haritinafon head removed the packaging and poured some into a transparent glass held by the head of Yaarafon. Standing a few steps ahead of the palace elders, and facing us [my research assistants and myself], the Yaarafon head, the Haritinafon head and the palace linguist performed the libation – pouring the Schnapp in bits onto the earth – accompanied by incantations inviting Korowii (Almighty God) and their ancestors to join the meeting” (Fieldnote #3, fieldwork 2022).

This fieldnote illustrates how public deliberations in Bamboi – especially those involving the Mo traditional authorities – begin by ritually invoking Korowii and the ancestral hierarchy. These invocations reaffirm the continuity between the living and the dead and to Korowii, binding present-day decision-making to the moral expectations and guardianship of past generations. In doing so, they frame natural resources, including water, as gifts of nature from Korowii and inheritances entrusted to humans, rather than mere physical assets.

²¹ The caretaker chief.

²² A foreign liquor brand that is usually preferred for traditional events in many areas in Ghana. Some Ghanaian researchers have raised questions on how this foreign brand is preferred for traditional events than locally brewed drinks such as *pito* and palm wine made of millet/maize/sorghum and palm tree respectively.

6.1.1 Cosmic worldviews and the ethic of stewardship

Among a significant section of Bamboi residents, the world is not solely material. Rather, it consists of interwoven physical and non-physical realms – a cosmological space where humans coexist with spirits, ancestors, and other non-human beings embedded in the land, vegetation, mountains, and water bodies. Within this worldview, humans occupy a stewardship role, responsible for safeguarding the natural environment to maintain harmony with the cosmic order and continue receiving its benefits. Aryeh (2025) offers a similar perspective, showing that the interaction between humans, the environment, and supernatural forces positions humans as custodians charged with preventing depletion or degradation of resources such as water.

Strang (2021) similarly emphasises that many societies view water and other natural elements as sentient, sacred and interconnected beings. Within such epistemologies, water shifts from being an economic commodity to a personified entity deserving of reverence, reciprocity and non-exploitative engagement (Kimmerer, 2012). Understanding this sacredness is crucial for interpreting how Bamboi conceptualises the responsibilities, obligations and moral boundaries that underpin water use and decision-making.

Bamboi's cosmic worldview does not neatly align with the scientific orientation that frames the environment as a neutral, physical system governed by logical or mechanistic processes (May, 2018; Harré, 1983). Instead, the cosmology situates water bodies within a moral universe where actions, words, and intentions carry spiritual consequences. The succeeding section unpacks how Bamboi connects to the non-physical world in their daily interactions and how that relates to water governance in evolving literature (such as Nowak et al., 2024; Cohen et al., 2023; Strang, 2023; Kramm, 2020).

Public engagements such as the palace meeting (described in fieldnote #3 and illustrated in Figure 41) reinforces the relationship between the physical world and the cosmic world. Libation, performed by a nominated elder, accompanied by incantations invoking Korowii and named ancestors, ensures that governance decisions occur in the presence of moral witnesses. These non-physical beings are believed to be pure, just, and, when necessary, punitive. Their invoked presence is thought to regulate behaviour, discouraging dishonesty, anger, unresolved conflict, and other behaviours that threaten social harmony.



Figure 41: Moments of water and Schnapp libation before meetings

Source: Fieldwork (2022/2023).

Similar relationships are documented elsewhere. Among Indigenous communities in Canada, water is considered a relative to whom people owe responsibilities (Wilson and Inkster, 2018).

McGregor (2014) shows that among the Anishinaabek in Ontario, water and other elements of the environment are viewed as kin who reciprocate human care by providing clean and reliable water. Such relational ontologies stand in contrast to Westernised frameworks (Kimmerer 2012), especially those that position the state as the ultimate authority in water governance, defining water access through policy, infrastructure, and regulation (McGregor, 2014). Thus, Bamboi's libation practices are not symbolic and performative but are forms of moral governance, embedding decision-making within a spiritual, ancestral and ecological framework.

These practices resonate with arguments by Nowak et al. (2024), Kramm (2020), Pargament (2013) and Puchalski et al. (2009), who describe spirituality as a connection between humans and a higher power or non-physical world that shapes meaning, behaviour, and motivation. Spirituality may involve prayer, meditation, and ritual (Puchalski et al., 2009), and can vary across cultures. However, its core feature, seeking meaning through connection with the divine or the sacred, is deeply reflected in Bamboi's relationship with water and natural resources. Here, spirituality is not abstract; it is materially located in surface water bodies and other natural resources. People believe that invoking the presence of Korowii and the ancestors helps produce honesty, collective responsibility, and better outcomes during public deliberations that may affect water governance. Through this worldview, water governance becomes inseparable from cosmology.

Localised governance of water in Bamboi is thus shaped by the recognition of water as a sacred, vital and relational entity. This worldview grounds practices of care, protection, and cautious use. It also inspires the village's norms that prioritise sustainability, ecological balance, and moral responsibility, aligning with what Kimmerer (2012) calls a reciprocal relationship with nature. The meanings attributed to water vary across individuals and groups in Bamboi, yet a common thread persists, water is more than a material substance. For some, this meaning emerges from direct

experience. For example, individuals whose relatives drowned in the BVR, Suukørl pond or Mofaga stream, and who petitioned the Mokooro to initiate customary rites to retrieve the body, describe water as possessing forces beyond the physical. In an informal conversation with one young man at the BVR, he explained that the BVR has a force that can entice and drown people, a force he believed was not physical:

“[...] once you get closer to the river, there is a force that will entice you to swim in it. If you are unable to overcome that force and dare yourself to swim, the river will take you away to that far and deep side [pointing his fingers at that spot]. I have seen it drowning people, both residents and outsiders [...] so many times.” (VR 12, fieldwork 2023).

Such narratives illustrate how water is perceived as an agentive being, capable of acting, enticing, or punishing, an idea prevalent across Bamboi and beyond. In contrast, dominant water scholarship has largely focused on physical scarcity, availability, and infrastructural delivery for agriculture, domestic use, and industry. These framings position water as an economic resource, something to be owned, managed, extracted, and controlled (Cohen et al., 2023; Wilson and Inkster, 2018). Such perspectives often promote commodification and over-extraction at the expense of ecological and cultural considerations. However, water also carries social, cultural, aesthetic, spiritual, and ecological values that cannot be captured or quantified through economic metrics alone. As this section shows, focusing exclusively on scarcity or infrastructure obscures the rich and complex meanings attached to water and its governance in places like Bamboi.

In the next section, I explore the embodiment of water in Bamboi, thus, how water becomes a being with personality, agency, and relational significance, and how these meanings shape everyday practices of use, access, safeguarding, and governance.

6.2 Local framing of water in Bamboi

One would ordinarily assume that water governance in the twenty-first century is driven primarily by modernity, technocratic rationality, and neoliberal ideas. However, as Strand (2023) illustrates in her discussion of the enduring mystical associations surrounding water across world cultures, the meanings people attach to water often transcend scientific and economic framings. Bamboi exemplifies this complexity. The village's understandings of water – deeply shaped by the Koora family gate – merge material, spiritual, historical and cosmological dimensions. The rest of this section unpacks these meanings.

Eager to meet the Mokooro/Nsuowura as part of my introduction to the village and having been repeatedly directed to him by those I engaged with, my research assistant followed the culturally appropriate protocol of informing him prior to our visit. As I noted in Chapter Three, pre-informing traditional authorities is a necessary act of respect in Ghanaian customary contexts, particularly for non-routine interactions such as research. After confirming the visit, we met the Mokooro on the morning of Wednesday, 31 August. He narrated the long historical evolution of the institution of water priesthood, including the responsibilities of water/river priests – elements partly discussed in Chapter Three.

According to the Mokooro, there exists an inherent affinity between Bamboi and its water bodies, particularly the BVR, referred to in this thesis as Nnaa Moo. The Koorafon family is positioned as the indisputable custodian of this relationship, an authority rooted in their priestly responsibility for the BVR and other water sources. This custodianship extends beyond physical management: in Bamboi, water possesses not only material value but also spiritual, moral, and cosmic

significance. It is conceptualised as a living entity with a body, spirit, lineage and agency. For instance, one Key Informant revealed the following:

“The trees, plants, herbs, weeds, aquatic lives, the water and unseen elements under the river represent the spouses, children, and extended relatives of a water body in Bamboi [...] I was told about how the “power” and “spirit” of the water [referring to the BVR] departed when one of biggest *onyina*²³ was uprooted during the construction of the Bamboi Bridge.” (KII 3, fieldwork 2022).

Using this narrative as an entry point, KII 3 described the extensive supernatural implications of constructing the bridge. In his worldview, the “power” of Nnaa Moo, which sustained the village’s identity and fortunes, departed and had to be restored through a series of incantations and intercessions performed both locally and in neighbouring countries upstream. For those who share such beliefs, the trees, aquatic organisms, and surrounding landscapes constitute the river’s “lineage” – a concept I refer to here as *water lineage*. Under this worldview, water bodies and their connected ecosystems are perceived as extended families with their own relational networks, temperaments, protections, and responses to human conduct.

This worldview has two important implications. First, it compels people in Bamboi to treat water and its associated elements (trees, aquatic organisms, riverbanks) as beings with feelings capable of responding to pollution or desecration. Second, it aligns with evolving global debates on granting legal personality or personhood status to rivers (Nowak et al., 2024; Kramm, 2020). In both domains, water is recognised as an entity with intrinsic rights and spiritual or moral standing, which reinforces the need for sustainable and respectful environmental practices.

²³ Botanically known as *Ceiba pentandra* (see Addo-Danso et al., 2019).

These beliefs condition particular behaviours: residents often avoid actions that may “offend” water’s body or spirit. Importantly, cosmic power is not limited to rivers alone – Bamboi residents consider even sachets²⁴ of water as capable of possessing spiritual purity or impurity depending on their source. In everyday life, water plays a central role in libation and customary rites, including outdoorings, marriage ceremonies, festivals, enstoolments, and funerals, performed by traditional rulers or culturally inclined residents.

Each water body in Bamboi therefore has its own narrative, mythology, taboo system and totems that personify it as a mystical being situated within a cosmic order that governs human conduct. As elaborated in Section 6.2.3, these narratives help enforce norms that protect water sources from misuse or over-extraction. In this reciprocal worldview, natural resources – especially water bodies – must be treated with reverence. When a breach occurs, such as a drowning, sudden flood, erratic rainfall or road accident near the river, these events are interpreted not solely as natural or climatic occurrences but as signs of a ruptured relationship requiring ritual repair. Sanctification rites, annual or spontaneous, therefore serve as mechanisms of recalibrating the cosmic balance (see Section 6.3.3).

Residents believe that stewardship yields reciprocal benefits. Individuals often seek fertility support, healing from chronic illnesses, protection against misfortune or guidance for travel and career through the water priesthood or by personally voicing their petitions at the riverbank. However, many residents acknowledge that colonial administration, contemporary governance arrangements, urbanisation, shifting religious orientations and the weakening authority of

²⁴ Potable water sealed in flexible plastic sleeves, usually in 500-millilitre units. They are the most common form of commercially sold drinking water in Ghana.

traditional institutions have gradually eroded the once-smooth reciprocal relationship between the village and its water bodies.

Despite these pressures, the cosmic relationship between the Koora family and Nnaa Moo persists through the institution of water/river priesthood. This institution forms part of the broader Village Traditional Water Governance (VTWG) system, which shapes decisions regarding access, use, control, and management of the BVR and other water bodies for residents, visitors and external agencies.

However, the institutional design centralises authority within the highest ranks of the Koorafon. Water priests regulate taboos, totems and extraction rules, reinforcing moral order and cosmological obligations. However, this centralisation also produces exclusionary spaces. The selection of water priests is limited to the Koorafon, one of the six Mo family gates, and further restricted to those with patrilineal Koora descent. Eligibility is contingent on “acceptable” marital arrangements, specifically those involving the payment of bridewealth prior to conception and birth. Children born outside these norms are excluded from consideration, reaffirming broader intersectional dynamics of lineage, legitimacy, gendered authority, and customary belonging. The phases of priestly selection are illustrated in Figure 42.

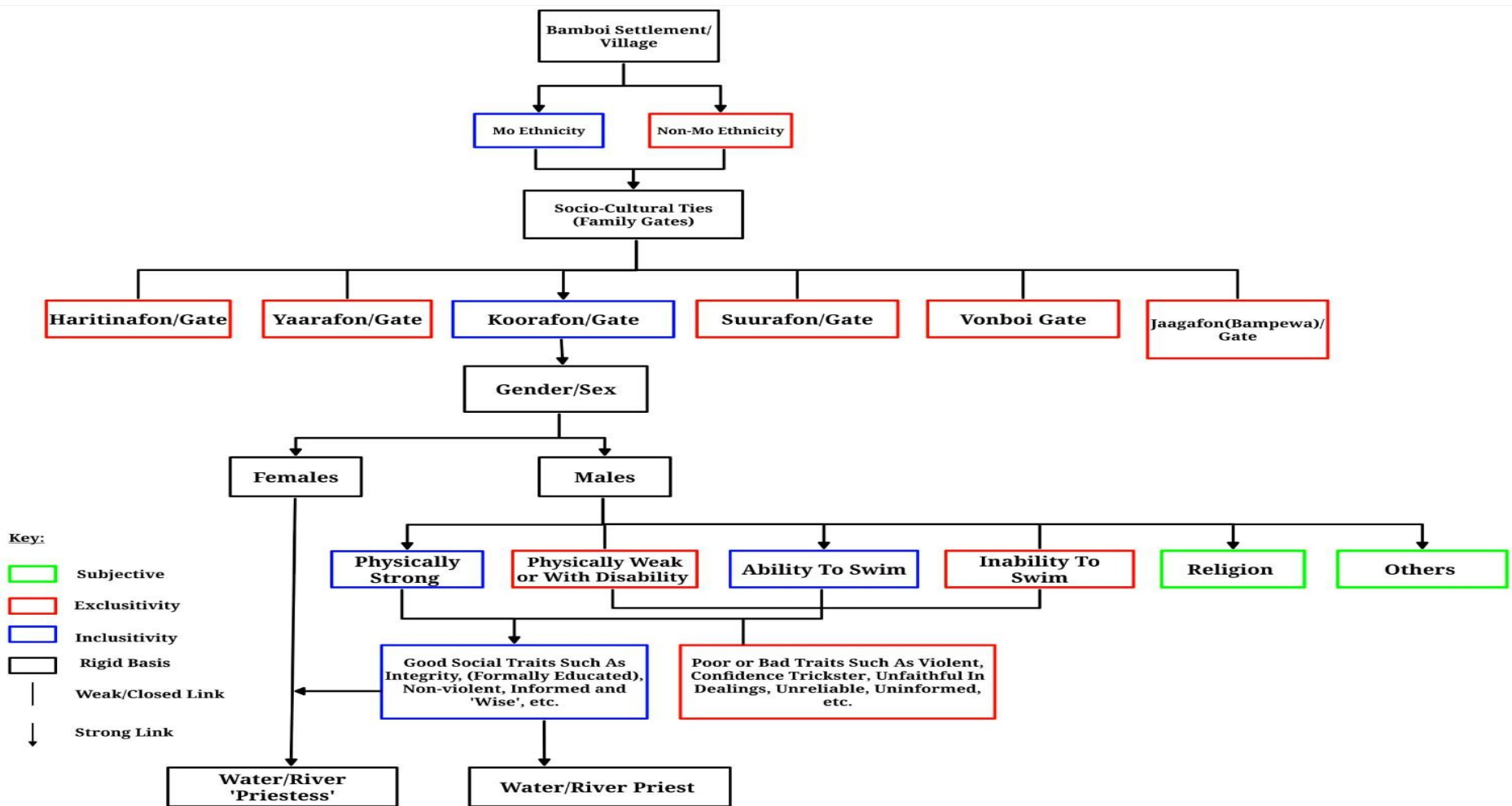


Figure 42: Phases of inclusion and exclusion in key water decision role (Priesthood) in Bamboi

Source: Author's construct.

6.2.1 Water as a sacred and supernatural entity in Bamboi

In the preceding sections, I showed that water embodies multiple meanings in Bamboi. Here, I focus specifically on its sacred and supernatural status within the village's cosmology. For many residents, water's sacredness is inherent, bestowed by Korowii, and therefore cannot be desecrated or rendered "impure" by human actions. This belief shapes everyday interactions with water and informs broader responsibilities towards safeguarding water bodies.

During fieldwork, this sacred framing became visible in an encounter with a young woman in her mid-twenties who had joined a group of women fetching water from the BVR with silver basins. Without hesitation, she bent down, scooped water directly from the river with her hand, and drank it. When I later engaged her in an informal conversation, she explained:

"The water in the river is clean and pure. That is how God made it. What you can physically see with your eyes as contaminants do not matter" (VR 8, fieldwork 2023).

This perspective illustrates a worldview in which divine creation supersedes physical evidence. The river's purity is understood as metaphysical, not merely physical.



Figure 43: A young woman (third from left) drinking directly from the BVR while fetching from the river

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

She further explained that the BVR possesses supernatural powers and a self-cleansing capacity, making it intrinsically safe for drinking. As I discussed in Chapter Three, this interaction brought my ethical research considerations into tension with Western scientific framings of potability and risk, revealing the friction between local epistemologies and globalised health paradigms. Meanwhile, this spiritual confidence exists alongside long-standing public-health concerns. Gyasi et al. (2018) identify high prevalence of waterborne diseases in the enclave, and UNICEF and WHO (2017) report significant annual diarrhoea mortalities attributable to unsafe water. During an informal conversation at the Bamboi village centre, a health worker from the Bamboi Clinic corroborated these concerns:

“This is what they do and get sick [referring to the act of drinking directly from the BVR]. Go to the clinic and see the records at the OPD [Out Patient Department]; water borne diseases dominate. It is now that public education has even reduced their direct reliance on the BVR due to how they assume the water is safe [...]” (VR 13, fieldwork 2023).

The contradiction between spiritual certainty and empirical risk highlights a key tension in Bamboi’s waterscape: the river is simultaneously a sacred entity and a site of material vulnerability. This belief in water’s supernatural qualities is not unique to Bamboi. Aniah et al. (2014) found similar interpretations in five northeastern Ghanaian communities, where natural resources – especially rivers – are imbued with spiritual force and ancestral presence. Such cosmologies help to explain why water is often approached not merely as a physical resource but as a living being endowed with power, intentionality, and agency.

Whilst these beliefs can expose residents to health risks, I argue that they also hold latent potential for conservation. In an era of widespread water resource destruction – through artisanal mining, pollution, and unregulated extraction – a worldview that sacralises water can be a powerful counter-narrative. By framing water bodies as spiritually significant and morally protected entities, such perspectives may provide a culturally grounded basis for non-exploitative use, care, and ecological stewardship.

This section therefore illustrates how water’s sacredness in Bamboi shapes its governance – not only by influencing practices such as drinking from the river, but by embedding water within a broader moral universe in which its protection becomes both a spiritual duty and a communal responsibility.

6.2.2 Cultural perspectives on water in Bamboi

In Bamboi, water – particularly the BVR – is not merely a physical resource but a cultural emblem that embodies motherhood, power, and cultural identity. This symbolic framing emerged consistently across interviews, where residents described the river in deeply relational and affective terms. One Key Informant articulated this maternal symbolism by emphasising the river’s nurturing and life-sustaining qualities:

“[...] the *adre* [another name for the BVR] is a mother because it is mothers that care for their children [children here mean human dependents on the river]. It has fishes [...] the food vendors by the bus stops are making sales every day because of the river [...] it is even these days that business around the river has gone down. Previously, Bamboi was a booming business place. Whatever you carry to sell around the rest stop area gets sold.” (KII 2, fieldwork 2022).

Here, the imagery of motherhood is not metaphorical abstraction but reflects an everyday socio-ecological intimacy. The river “feeds,” “provides,” and “supports” both subsistence and commercial livelihoods. This maternal framing also signals a moral economy: the river is recognised as a caregiver whose generosity underpins the village’s survival, prosperity, and social reproduction. Its ebbing economic significance, as KII 2 revealed, is perceived almost as a decline in the mother’s former abundance.

Another Key Informant connected the BVR to the cultural prominence and identity of Bamboi within Ghana and beyond:

“Bamboi’s name is all over Ghana because of the BVR. When you travel outside the village to everywhere in Ghana, especially the south, and mention that you are from Bamboi, the

first response you are likely to get is, ‘*eii Black Volta-foɔ*’ [literally, ‘*eii* Black Volta people’]. Those who have travelled along this route will start sharing their experience in Bamboi and it is mostly about the BVR.” (KII 15, fieldwork 2023).

This narrative highlights how the BVR operates as a cultural marker that travels with people beyond the physical boundaries of the village. The identity of “Black Volta-foɔ” is relational, externally recognised, and socially reproduced through stories, mobility, and memory. The river thus becomes a symbolic anchor through which Bamboi is known, referenced, and categorised within the wider Ghanaian social landscape.

Together, the accounts from KII 2 and KII 15 exemplify how natural resources such as rivers accrue layered cultural meanings that shape the identity of settlements built around them. Such attributions resonate with broader African and global scholarship on how water bodies become embedded in the sociocultural fabric of settlements, influencing place-making, belonging, and collective memory (Kovács, 2024; Agyekum, 2006).

Having established how the BVR embodies motherhood, power, and collective identity, the next section turns to an equally significant cultural and even more intimate dimension of local water framing: the ways in which water resources in Bamboi are understood as possessing distinct personalities – as actors with moods, dispositions, and intentionalities and how these shape people’s interaction with them.

6.2.3 Water as personalities in Bamboi

The naming of surface water bodies including rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, and even drains, is a widespread cultural practice across many societies, serving as a means of identity formation and social memory (Kovács, 2024; Muriuki, 2024). Such names often emerge from the geographical

location, historical events, or unique characteristics associated with the water body (Muriuki, 2024; Nkuna et al., 2024). In Ghana, major water bodies such as the Offin, Bosomtwe, Volta, Tano, Afram and Pra Rivers commonly bear identities linked to the places they flow through or the settlements that rely on them (Nkansah and Bonsu, 2024; Ansah and Mireku-Gyimah, 2021; Asamoah and Akuamah, 2021; Mireku-Gyimah and Mensah, 2015; Agyekum, 2006). In some cases, the names of the water bodies define the place-naming, for example, the Volta Region of Ghana. This naming practice, however, is not limited to large rivers. Streams, ponds, dams, deltas, and even stagnant water drain often acquire human or circumstantial names. Among some Akan²⁵ settlements, for instance, non-major²⁶ water bodies are given gendered or anthropomorphic names such as *Abena*²⁷ (Agyekum, 2006) and *Odo*²⁸, reflecting cultural logics of personhood and relationality.

Bamboi offers a particularly vivid example of the personification of water bodies. Here, water is not only named but understood to possess personalities, shaped by local experiences, beliefs, and encounters with specific water bodies. These attributions often carry gendered undertones and situate water within a cosmology where rivers and streams are social actors with intentions, temperaments and powers. One such example is the Mofaga stream, which features prominently in local storytelling. Residents describe Mofaga as a living entity with “children” – mysterious aquatic beings believed to bear gold on their foreheads. This mystical narrative echoes similar stories I have encountered in the Ashanti Region, where certain rivers are said to reveal their “children” periodically, appearing as extraordinary fish adorned with luminous, precious markings.

²⁵ A major ethnic group in Ghana, which I unpacked in relation to my positionality at Chapter Three (3.2).

²⁶ These include small streams, dug-outs, ponds and stagnant water at water logged areas.

²⁷ An automatic Asante/Akan name for females born on Tuesday. All the other days of the week have specific names for both males and females.

²⁸ Akan/Asante word for *love*.

During an informal conversation with a middle-aged man who has lived in Bamboi for most of his life, he recounted witnessing these phenomena:

“During rainy seasons of some years ago, you will start hearing rumours one morning that one of the “children” of Mofaga is out. You will go and see a big fish with a shiny element which we believe is gold on its head. [...] Even the stream itself has gold, but some of the elders went for consultations some years ago and were told mining it would require some human sacrifice – but who will be sacrificed in today’s world purposely to attone for the gold?” (VR 5, fieldwork 2022).

This account highlights how water bodies in Bamboi are embedded within a cosmological system that intertwines spirituality, economy, and morality. The belief that Mofaga harbours “children” and contains gold that demands human sacrifice positions the stream as a powerful entity whose resources cannot be accessed without moral and spiritual negotiation. The story also reflects broader patterns documented in Ghana, where personified rivers such as River Koraa in Berekum are believed to host spiritually significant beings, rendering their fish and crabs' taboo for consumption (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013).

The personification of water bodies – as beings with agency, moral authority, and lineage – has gained increasing attention in water scholarship due to its implications for how people relate to water as part of their embodied and ancestral identity (Kramm, 2020; Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013). When water is conceived as a personality with rights, obligations and relational expectations, it shifts from being a mere resource to a socially embedded entity. This framing aligns with contemporary legal scholarship that argues for the recognition of natural entities – such as rivers – as legal persons (Nowak et al., 2024). Such recognition provides grounds for resisting harmful

human actions, including those driven by state-led development priorities that threaten a water body's ecological wellbeing.

Ultimately, the personification of water in Bamboi reconfigures human–water relations. It invites a relational ethic that challenges the reduction of water to an exploitable “thing” and instead foregrounds reciprocal responsibilities, respect, and care (Cohen et al., 2023, p.1878). Through these narratives, water emerges not simply as a natural resource but as an active participant in the social, spiritual, and moral life of the settlement.

These personified understandings of water do more than assign character and agency to rivers and streams; they actively shape how residents interpret appropriate and inappropriate human behaviour around water bodies. In Bamboi, the moral expectations implied in water’s “personality” translate into normative codes that govern everyday conduct at ponds, streams, and the BVR. These norms frame certain actions as respectful, harmful, or even taboo, thereby influencing how pollution is understood, sanctioned, and managed within the village. The next section unpacks how such norm-shaped expectations constitute an important layer of local water governance.

6.2.4 Norm-shaped water pollution in Bamboi

Pollution of surface water bodies in Bamboi is not perceived as a universal wrongdoing but is instead interpreted through localised norms about how different water bodies behave. These norms arise from longstanding cultural constructions regarding the flow, character, and moral temperament of each water body. As my field encounters at both the BVR and the Suukørɩ pond repeatedly demonstrated, residents follow a shared logic that differentiates between “self-cleansing” and “self-accumulating” waters. The BVR, as a fast-flowing river, is believed to cleanse itself because all impurities “move away” downstream, whereas the pond (its water contained and still) is thought to retain and “store” any pollution. This perception discourages the disposal of

wastewater into the pond but normalises similar acts at the BVR. As one of my fieldnotes summarises:

“The rivers are believed to be self-cleansing due to the nature of its flow [downstream] whilst a pond is locally perceived as ‘self-accumulating’, thereby discouraging its use and pollution. The pond is less polluted because the locals believe that if they pollute it with wastewater, it will not flow away but accumulate and make the water ‘unsafe’. This demotivates its pollution unlike the BVR.” (Fieldnote #4, fieldwork 2022).

These norms were vividly expressed during my routine walks to the riverbank. On one such visit, a woman in her early fifties invited conversation as she washed clothes, rhythmically exchanging soapy wastewater with fresh river water. When I gently probed her views on whether such practices might pollute the river – especially given that many people drink directly from it – she confidently drew on the normative belief that the BVR inherently rejects dirt. She shared the following:

“Oh, nsuo wei deε wɔmpɛ fin, Sɛ yɛ ɛdi nkɔmɔ. Twen kakra bi, wo bɛ hunu sɛ anii asan ati” [literally, “Oh, as for this water, it does not like dirt, so it does not retain it. As we chat, wait for a while. You will see that the surface will become clear again”.] (VR 14, fieldwork 2023).

Her interpretation positions the river as an active agent with the capacity to cleanse, heal, and restore itself – reinforcing the everyday justification for washing and waste disposal in the BVR.



Figure 44: Interacting with the laundrywoman at the BVR on the norms of surface water pollution

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

She further contrasted this narrative with the Suukørl pond, where the lack of flow requires greater physical effort to maintain water quality, hence, does not prefer it for domestic activities or commercial laundry. Her reasoning was mirrored by another woman in similar age group, doing laundry at Suukørl:

“Washing here is very tedious because when you want to exchange water, you have to carry the wastewater to a far distance, else, it will re-enter the pond. Since the pond does not flow like the adre [BVR], it will make the water in the pond dirty. That is not good for other domestic uses like cooking. [...] Although I stay closer to this pond, I usually wash at the BVR [quizzing me to imagine the distance] but today, I am doing it here because the things are few and I will not exchange the water a lot.” (VR 15, fieldwork 2023).

For VR 14, VR 15, and many others I encountered, these practices are not understood as pollution but as rational, norm-guided interactions that respect the intrinsic “nature” of each water body. The behaviour only appears contradictory when viewed through technocratic or scientific (biomedical) lenses; within local epistemologies, it is internally coherent.



Figure 45: Interacting with a woman at the Suukorl pond on the norms of different surface water pollution

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

However, these norm-shaped practices sit in tension with other dimensions of Bamboi’s water worldview. Whilst the sacred and supernatural attributes of water – especially rivers – encourage reverence, restraint, and protective behaviours (as discussed in earlier sections), everyday practices shaped by norms of “self-cleansing” can unintentionally degrade water quality. This tension becomes more pronounced as modern detergents (soda-based and chemically produced) replace traditional *alata semina* soaps made from cocoa and plantain residues. When these contemporary practices intersect with longstanding norms, the ecological burden on rivers increases, even as residents insist that the BVR “does not like dirt.” Thus, the very worldview that venerates rivers

as living, sacred entities simultaneously legitimise behaviours that expose them to pollution – revealing a complex interplay between cosmology, everyday pragmatism, and the evolving materialities of domestic life in Bamboi.

The norm-shaped practices surrounding water use and pollution reveal that everyday interactions with rivers and ponds in Bamboi are guided not only by cosmological beliefs or pragmatic needs but also by deeply embedded social codes about how different water bodies behave. These local understandings of rivers as self-cleansing and ponds as self-accumulating do more than shape domestic routines; they also sit within a broader moral ecology that influences how water bodies are valued, protected, and sometimes inadvertently harmed. To fully grasp how such norms coexist, intersect, or conflict with spiritual, customary, and formal expectations of water governance, it is necessary to examine the wider layers of stewardship that organise water relations in Bamboi. The next section therefore turns to these layered governance systems, exploring how local institutions, cosmological authorities, and everyday actors collectively shape natural (water) resource stewardship in the village.

6.3 Layers of natural (water) stewardship in Bamboi

In this section, I unpack the iterative layers through which water stewardship is conceptualised and enacted in Bamboi. These layers encompass (as captured in Figure 46) both physical and non-physical spaces, reflecting a cosmovision in which natural resources are neither accidental nor solely material, but spiritually anchored, socially inherited, and morally governed.

In Bamboi's cosmological worldview, natural resources – particularly water – do not simply “exist”; they originate from an ultimate proprietor, God/Korowii. Korowii is regarded as the creator of all natural resources, each interconnected and functioning to meet human needs. Water,

therefore, is not only a utilitarian substance but a divine provision woven into the fabric of daily life.

Beneath Korowii in this cosmological ordering are the ancestors, traced through the lineage of the earliest settlers of Bamboi. These ancestors are understood as having once lived physically in the settlement but now reside in a non-physical realm – the *other world* – entered through death. Although absent in bodily form, they remain alive cosmically, maintaining relational ties with the living. Importantly, they left behind natural resources, including water, as an inheritance for the present and future generations. This inheritance is not passive; it carries obligations about how such gifts are used and protected.

Below the ancestors stands the present generation, the current appropriators, beneficiaries, and custodians of natural resources. In the Bamboi cosmovision, the present generation holds a dual entitlement: *the right* to appropriate benefits from natural resources, and *the responsibility* to protect and preserve these resources for future generations and for the ancestors who continue to oversee their stewardship.

Thus, stewardship is not an abstract principle but a cosmic responsibility, failure of which is believed to bring both physical misfortunes (for example, scarcity, sickness, conflicts) and metaphysical consequences (ancestral displeasure, disrupted cosmological balance). This intertwining of usufruct rights and custodial duties forms the ethical basis of water governance in Bamboi. A Key Informant articulated this sense of moral obligation with striking clarity:

“See, if we keep quiet for this water to be polluted by actions of miners and other unpermitted activities on the adre [BVR], we will all pay for it. Sometimes, people forget about themselves. These are some of the actions that bring misfortunes to people in the

village [...]. As for me, I would fight till I could breathe no more. I prefer dying protecting the water than living to witness its pollution by greedy actions [...]" (KII 2, fieldwork 2023).

This narration resonates strongly with Aryeh's (2025) assertion that the human–natural resources relationship is bound by obligations of protection and preservation in exchange for the provisions that such resources offer. Aryeh locates this responsibility within a biblical framework, particularly the stewardship mandate given to humans by God in the New Testament. Whilst the ethical thrust of Aryeh's argument aligns with the Bamboi perspective, the root of stewardship in Bamboi is not Christian doctrine but traditional cosmovision, expressed through practices such as libation, ritual observances, supernatural appeasement, and reverence for ancestral oversight.

In this sense, although the moral logic of stewardship parallels wider theological frameworks, the epistemic grounding is distinctly local: shaped by indigenous belief systems, ancestral memory, cosmological accountability, and everyday relational interactions with water bodies. These beliefs form one of the foundational layers of the multi-scalar and hybrid water governance system that the subsequent sections explore.



Figure 46: Participatory illustration of layers of natural resource stewardship in Bamboi

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

6.3.1 The Village Water Governance Systems (VWGS)

The Village Water Governance System in Bamboi reflect a multilayered assemblage of actors, worldviews, and responsibilities that collectively shape everyday decisions regarding water. In this section, I unpack these governance structures by foregrounding the roles and relational authority of the different categories of people who influence water access, protection, and use in the village. Water decision-making in Bamboi operates through two primary pathways – internal and external – and an intermediary semi-internal pathway. These pathways together constitute a hybrid governance landscape embedded in both customary cosmologies and state-driven frameworks. The next sections discuss the various pathways.

6.3.1.1 *The internal pathways: Custodianship, rites, and cosmological stewardship*

The internal pathways of water governance emerge from Bamboi’s cosmological framing of natural resources and are led by the *Mokooro* and *Koora Yaa Kumah*, the water priests of the *Koorafon* (Koora family gate). Their authority centres on stewardship responsibilities, ritual obligations, and the maintenance of taboos that safeguard the “purity,” stability, and moral order of the Black Volta River and its associated waters.

Although their ritual work focuses primarily on the BVR – understood as the “parent” water – Bamboi’s worldview holds that all water sources in the village, including bottled or sachet water, retain lineage ties to surface or underground sources. Thus, the transformation of water into new forms does not sever it from its ancestral origin. As explained in Section 6.2, this notion of “water lineage” positions all waters as members of a single family. Consequently, rituals performed on the BVR effectively speak on behalf of the entire hydro-social family.

In addition to ritual performances, a set of taboos and sanctions regulates everyday interactions with the BVR. Whilst these rules are widely known among residents, non-residents approaching the river – particularly from the main Bamboi slope – are informed of them upon arrival. The slope, which doubles as a transport stop and vantage point, is informally monitored by men (often drivers) who alert strangers, caution inappropriate behaviour, and notify the water priests when potential violations occur. This informal, everyday surveillance reinforces the cultural boundaries that protect the river.

6.3.1.2 The external pathways: State authority, infrastructure, and bureaucratic water management

External pathways of decision-making are shaped primarily by formal institutions of the Government of Ghana, especially the Bui Power Authority (BPA) and the Bole District Assembly. The BPA's involvement stems from the presence of the BVR gorge and the strategic implications of the Bui Dam. Its mandate in Bamboi focuses on ensuring that activities along the downstream stretch neither endanger the dam's operations nor expose residents to risks arising from dam discharges. Thus, BPA's governance centre is the uninterrupted flow and hydrological stability of the BVR.

The Bole District Assembly, on the other hand, has statutory responsibility for providing potable drinking water for the village. This obligation is operationalised through government funding and, where necessary, the mobilisation of external support from NGOs working on water supply. As outlined in Chapter Four, this formal pathway emphasises infrastructural provision, planning standards, and the technocratic framing of water as a public service.

6.3.1.3 The semi-internal pathways: Travellers, neighbouring settlements, and situational triggers

Situated between the internal and external pathways is a semi-internal pathway comprising everyday travellers, short-term visitors, and residents of neighbouring settlements who rely on Bamboi's water bodies – especially the BVR – for diverse activities.

Although these groups do not possess decision-making authority, their actions can trigger regulatory responses from the internal custodians, especially when those actions violate local taboos or pose spiritual or ecological risk. A notable example is the transportation of hearses across the Bamboi Bridge. Within Bamboi's cosmovision, the movement of a corpse across the river without prior rites is believed to provoke calamities for both the community and the transporters. In such moments, the Mokooro and Koora Yaa Kumah intervene to perform necessary rites, demonstrating how semi-internal actors indirectly shape internal governance actions.

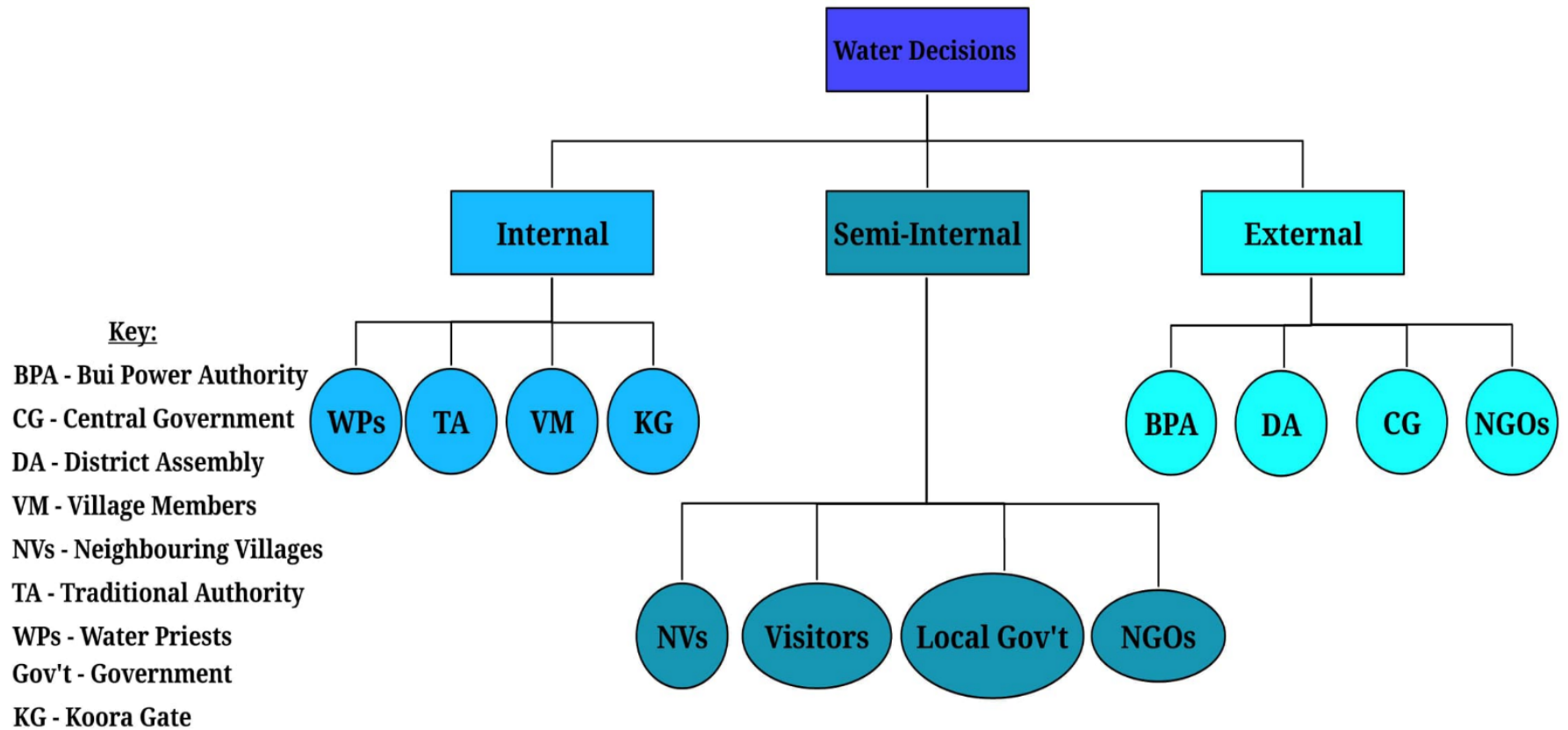


Figure 47: Water governance pathways in Bamboi

Source: Author's construct.

Figure 47 illustrates how these pathways intersect to produce a multi-layered and hybrid water governance landscape in Bamboi. What emerges is not a neatly bounded system of institutions but a fluid assemblage in which customary authority, state actors, and transient users continuously interact to shape water decisions. The internal pathway retains ontological primacy because it is rooted in cosmological legitimacy, ritual authority and long-standing stewardship responsibilities. However, the presence of the BPA and the Bole District Assembly introduce bureaucratic and technocratic logics that coexist – but do not fully align – with local norms. The semi-internal pathway further complicates this landscape by introducing actors whose actions may inadvertently trigger ritual interventions, thus demonstrating how even those without formal or customary authority can influence governance outcomes. These pathways together reveal that water governance in Bamboi is neither wholly traditional nor wholly modern, but an evolving assemblage of overlapping authorities, ritual obligations, and bureaucratic mandates shaped by everyday encounters, overlapping jurisdictions, and deep-seated cosmological beliefs.

To understand how these logics shape stewardship practices, the next section turns to the layered worldviews and inherited duties through which Bamboi residents make sense of their responsibilities toward natural (water) resources.

6.3.2 The Koorafon and water resources in Bamboi

This section examines the roles of the various gates of the Mo ethnicity in Bamboi, with particular attention to the Koorafon, whose authority is central to the village's localised water governance system. There are six (6) recognised family gates in Bamboi – Haritinafon, Yaarafon, Vonboi, Suarafon, Jaagafon and Koorafon. These gates are believed to possess the autochthonous rights to the village's natural resources through their descent from the first settlers, who trace their origins

to Sissala-bound²⁹ ancestors (see Chapter Four). These autochthonous rights shape the allocation of custodial responsibilities across the gates and structure the governance of both land and water in Bamboi.

The Haritinafon gate oversees matters relating to land. As holders of autochthonous land rights, they are responsible for both its physical protection and its spiritual safeguarding. This role is enacted through rituals that sanctify the land and honour the ancestors who first appropriated it. The Yaara fon gate, by contrast, is the seat of paramount chieftaincy, holding broad custodianship over all village resources. However, their authority is exercised in coordination with the specific gate mandated to steward a certain natural resource domains – such as Haritinafon for land and Koorafon for water.

The Vonboi gate is entrusted with conflict resolution. Locally described in Akan terms as the *dwantoo* (intercessor), the gate provides refuge for individuals fleeing mob retaliation. In conversations with the head of Vonboi, he explained that a pursued individual who reaches the residence of any Vonboi member automatically receives protection, regardless of the offence. Judgment is delivered only after the Vonboi listens to the case, following which the council of elders or, where necessary, the Ghana Police Service determines the outcome. This makes the Vonboi a peace-making gate whose role extends beyond mediation to moral and social protection.

The Suurafon and Jaagafon gates do not possess direct custodial responsibilities over natural resources. Suurafon members commonly serve as linguists during public and palace functions, while Jaagafon maintains palace representation through a gate head and a hankoora/obaapanin.

²⁹ In Chapter Four, I explained that the Mo ethnic group in Bamboi believes their first settlers migrated from the Sissala ethnicity in the Upper West Region. Key Informants in the village and scholars including Awedoba (1996), Grindal (1972) and Bendor-Samuel (1971) confirm this.

Their roles contribute to the political and ceremonial functioning of the village, even if they do not manage natural resources directly. The rest of the section focuses on the Koorafon.

The Koorafon occupies a distinct position within Bamboi's governance of water resources. The gate holds the custodial rights over all water bodies and is responsible for nominating both male and female priests (the Mokooro and the Koora Yaa Kumah) who perform the rituals, rites and safeguarding duties required to protect water resources across the village. Beyond selecting the priests, members of the Koorafon also perceive themselves as inheritors of the water bodies, viewing stewardship not as a delegated duty but as a birthright embedded in ancestry and cosmology.

The worldview of the Koorafon humanises water bodies – especially surface waters such as streams and the BVR. In this worldview, water possesses affective qualities, moral standing and rights akin to those of humans, yet lacks the agency to defend itself against harm. This perceived vulnerability provides the moral and spiritual justification for the Koorafon's exclusive right to intervene in water matters, initiate sanctions, and mobilise actions – typically through directives from the Mokooro – to protect the waterscape against harmful practices.

This authority was vividly demonstrated during this ethnography when a group of young Koorafon men invoked their custodial mandate to confront artisanal mining activities contributing to the pollution of the BVR. Their actions illustrate how the gate's stewardship is not merely symbolic but materially enacted in defence of the river's wellbeing.

These localised framings of water rights and responsibilities are rooted in non-Western and non-modern epistemologies. They foreground an understanding of natural resource governance that blends cosmology, inheritance, morality and embodied relationships with water. This aligns

with perspectives in cultural relativism (for example, Lee, 2021; Brown, 2008), which argue for development and governance frameworks that are attentive to diverse cultural logics, rather than imposing universalised models that risk obscuring local worldviews and practices.

Understanding the Koorafon's custodial authority reveals how water governance in Bamboi is grounded in lineage-based rights, ritual obligations, and culturally embedded notions of stewardship. Yet these responsibilities do not operate in isolation. They intersect with a wider framework of customary practices, spiritual expectations, and institutional arrangements that shape how natural (water) resources are protected and managed. The next section therefore turns to the broader layers of stewardship that emerge from these intertwined worldviews and institutional roles, examining how they collectively structure everyday governance of natural (water) resources in Bamboi.

6.3.3 The sanctification/purification of water resources in Bamboi

Sanctification of water resources in Bamboi is deeply rooted in localised cosmologies, even as the village increasingly navigates the social and infrastructural transformations associated with contemporary life in Ghana. In scientific and technocratic terms, water purification typically refers to physical or chemical processes designed to remove contaminants and render water potable or suitable for agricultural and industrial use (see Ahmad and Azam, 2019; Singh et al., 2018; Thompson, 2015; Amagloh and Benang, 2009; Lorch, 1987). Such procedures – filtration, chlorination, chemical treatment – have gained prominence in Bamboi in recent years, reflecting broader national shifts towards modernity, public health standards, and engineered water infrastructure.

However, despite the growing visibility of these modern purification methods, Bamboi's understanding of water purity remains anchored in non-physical, ritualised processes led by the priests of the Koorafon. In this worldview, purity is not merely the absence of biological or chemical contaminants but a spiritual and moral condition that shapes the wellbeing of the village and its waterscape. Sanctification, therefore, extends beyond material purification to encompass the restoration of harmony between humans, ancestors, and the water bodies that sustain life. Within this cosmological framing, Bamboi observes two principal forms of sanctification: an annual/mandatory sanctification, and a spontaneous sanctification.

Each process responds to different circumstances and carries distinct meanings, yet both reinforce the principle that water in Bamboi is not simply a physical resource but a spiritual entity requiring ongoing care, reverence and ritual maintenance. The next section elaborates on these two forms of sanctification and the cultural logics that underpin them.

6.3.3.1 The localised annual/mandatory sanctification of water resources

The annual sanctification of water resources in Bamboi is a mandatory ritual event that simultaneously performs thanksgiving to Korowii and the ancestors for their continued protection of the village's waters, and appeasement for any actions – intentional or accidental – that may incur misfortune for the settlement. Held throughout an entire day at the bank of the BVR, the event draws on the worldview of *water lineage* earlier discussed in Sections 6.2 and 6.3.1.1, where the BVR symbolises all water sources in Bamboi, including rainwater and packaged water. The sanctification unfolds in three phases: preparation, the event-day rituals, and post-event activities. These segments are unravelled in the rest of this section.

Preparation for the sanctification

The process begins when the Mokooro, acting on behalf of the Koorafon priests, privately informs the Chief of his readiness to initiate the annual rites. This announcement is then relayed formally at the palace, prompting leaders of all family gates to mobilise contributions and prepare for their ritual responsibilities. Preparation involves assembling ritual items and notifying individuals whose presence is essential for critical actions, such as witnessing libation and invoking the correct ancestral line during incantations. In Bamboi's cosmology, "rightful ancestors" are remembered ancestors who lived exemplary lives – those who held important offices, exhibited moral leadership, or significantly contributed to village wellbeing. These ancestors constitute a core layer of stewardship within Bamboi's natural resource governance system, as shown in Figure 46.

Once the palace notification is complete, the entire village, including non-Mo settlers, is informed through the Community Information System. Households and gate members thereafter begin their preparations. A white ram – considered ritually "pure" and "clean" – must be provided by the Mokooro. He may secure this through palace collaboration, village contributions, or by using an animal previously given as a thanksgiving gift by individuals who petitioned the BVR deity for blessings or reversals of misfortunes. Such gifts are common: residents and outsiders alike petition the river either directly at its bank or indirectly through a trusted intermediary such as one of the priests. When favourable outcomes follow, petitioners may return with gratitude gifts, which may later support the annual sanctification.

Alongside the ram, a mixture of grains cultivated in Bamboi such as millet, sorghum, maize, groundnuts, rice, beans, among others, is required. Prepared by the Koora Yaa Kumah, these grains carry symbolic significance. As explained by one priest, they represent the staples of the village

and are therefore an offering of what sustains life. Their presentation signifies unity between the past and present, and gratitude to Korowii for providing the diverse water sources – including rain – that enable food production. Although not compulsory, villagers are also encouraged to prepare and bring cooked food on the day of the event

The day of the sanctification

The ceremony begins at dawn with libation poured using Schnapp, after which the white ram is slaughtered by selected adult and young male members of the Koorafon. As the ram is killed, the Mokooro chants incantations in the Mo language and sprinkles its blood onto the river idol situated on the northwestern bank of the BVR. The ram is then divided into ritual portions, each allocated to the six family gates/fon through their respective male heads. The fatty portions – viewed as the most prestigious – are left on the idol as an offering.

The Koora Yaa Kumah then presents the cooked grains, which the Mokooro sprinkles on the deity while continuing incantations described by priests as a blend of thanksgiving, praise, and petitions on behalf of the entire community. Following these core ritual actions, attendees of all ethnic backgrounds step forward individually to present their cooked foods and drinks. A small portion of each offering is sprinkled onto the idol, accompanied by a personalised petition spoken in Mo. The remainder is set aside, and once all offerings have been made, the food is declared communal property. As one priest explained:

“Once the food is presented to the deity, it loses its original ownership. It just becomes like the water in the river; anyone can access it” (KII 2, fieldwork 2022).

This symbolic “de-ownership” reinforces the communal nature of water itself. After these rites, the atmosphere transforms into a festive celebration filled with music, drumming, and dancing.

Post sanctification activities

In the lead-up to the ceremony, various activities – particularly small contributions toward purchasing the white ram – may have been undertaken. Where no gifted ram is available, the cost is shared across the village. Traders at the Bamboi Bridge often contribute significantly due to the belief that the sanctification yields spiritual fortunes that enhance their commercial success. After the event, households that could not pay earlier are followed up to complete their contributions. The Mokooro and Koorafon leaders also extend gratitude to palace elders and key supporters who ensured the success of the ritual.

These processes collectively reaffirm Bamboi's deep attachment to its waters and the moral responsibilities associated with protecting them. The annual sanctification thereby serves as both a communal renewal ritual and a socio-spiritual mechanism for safeguarding the waterscape. Whilst the annual sanctification represents a scheduled communal renewal of the village's relationship with its water resources, Bamboi's cosmology also accommodates more immediate ritual responses. These spontaneous rites emerge in moments of perceived ecological disturbance, moral breach, or spiritual imbalance. The next section therefore explores the second dimension of the village's purification framework: the spontaneous sanctification of water resources.

6.3.3.2 The localised spontaneous sanctification of water resources

Unlike the annual rite, the spontaneous sanctification of water resources in Bamboi is not bound to a specific calendar moment. It is a fluid, incident-driven process initiated solely at the discretion of the Mokooro, whose judgment is guided by locally recognised signs of cosmic displeasure or ecological imbalance. These rites occur when a sequence of “unfortunate” or tabooed events

signals that the relationship between the village and its water sources – particularly the BVR – has been disturbed.

Within Bamboi's cosmology, repeated sightings of certain aquatic beings, especially culturally coded totems such as crocodiles, are read as messages from the supernatural realm. When such animals appear on the banks of the river multiple times, residents interpret the phenomenon as a warning of impending misfortune resulting from transgressions – whether deliberate or inadvertent – against the customs, taboos, and moral conventions governing water. These transgressions may include improper encounters with the BVR, violations of behavioural norms at the riverbank, or acts deemed spiritually polluting.

Similarly, accidental deaths in the river trigger spontaneous ritual action. If someone drowns in the BVR, the Mokooro must perform libation and other ritual procedures before the body may be retrieved. This requirement reflects the belief that the river embodies agency and affect, and that disturbing its depths, especially after a death, risks further spiritual or communal harm unless ritually negotiated.

The items used during spontaneous sanctification vary widely and are determined by the specific nature of the disturbance. The Mokooro's intuition – understood as spiritually informed discernment – guides the selection of ritual ingredients. At times, he may consult other priests, including those outside Bamboi or from non-Mo ethnic groups, whose broader ritual genealogies or expertise may be required. These rituals therefore constitute a flexible system of ecological and moral repair, allowing the community to respond swiftly to breaches of cosmological order.

6.3.4 Discussion of sanctifications of the water resources in the village

The coexistence of annual and spontaneous sanctification rituals illustrates how water governance in Bamboi is not merely a technical or ecological undertaking but a deeply relational, moral, and cosmological practice. Through the consistent observance of these rites, residents cultivate an acute consciousness of how human actions – whether everyday behaviours or extraordinary events – affect the wellbeing of water bodies, particularly the BVR. These ritual practices reinforce a relational ontology in which water is not an inert resource, but a sentient entity embedded within a wider network of ancestors, deities and human actors. This echoes broader African feminist and FPE scholarship that emphasises relationality, subjectivities, lived histories, emotions, moral obligations, intersecting power relations and the entanglement of the material and spiritual in resource governance (Sultana, 2021; Tamale, 2020; Truelove, 2019; Nnaemeka, 2004).

Although the reverence associated with these rituals has arguably diminished as Bamboi becomes increasingly exposed to modernist and technocratic forms of reasoning – a trend noted across Ghana and other African contexts (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013) – their persistence continues to play a crucial protective role. The annual and spontaneous rites function as socio-spiritual mechanisms that regulate behaviour, instil caution and discourage actions likely to harm water bodies. Norms and fears surrounding catastrophic consequences help shape environmental ethics in ways that modern regulatory systems often fail to achieve, especially in rural settings where state surveillance is limited.

However, the rituals also produce ambivalent outcomes. By reinforcing the belief that sacrificial acts – a white ram, grains, and libation – can cosmologically “reverse” or neutralise the impacts of harmful human behaviour, they may inadvertently encourage a moral buffering effect. This

compensatory logic risks giving the impression that ecological damage is spiritually reparable, rather than materially consequential. Similar patterns have been reported in other Ghanaian and West African contexts, where sanctification rites are used to “appease” river deities after destructive practices such as artisanal mining (Adomako, 2024; Baddianaah et al., 2021; Sarpong, 2017; Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013; Addei and Amankwah, 2011). Such practices simultaneously challenge and uphold harmful behaviours: they condemn the ecological offence yet offer pathways – ritual, symbolic and cosmological – for its spiritual remediation.

These dynamics highlight the epistemic tensions at the centre of Bamboi’s water governance: the coexistence of relational stewardship (rooted in African cosmologies and ancestor-mediated care) and ritualised absolution (which may reduce accountability for unsustainable actions). Through FPE lens, these ambiguities remind us that local ontologies are not static or inherently sustainable; they are internally contested, shifting, and embedded in lived negotiations of power, morality and cosmological order. Likewise, from a cultural relativist perspective, the rituals reflect a worldview that resists universalist prescriptions about “proper” water governance, instead privileging culturally situated modes of knowing and protecting water.

The sanctification rituals in Bamboi therefore exemplify how water governance is simultaneously spiritual, ecological, and political. They reinforce environmental responsibility, reaffirm communal identity, and maintain the legitimacy of the Koorafon and other custodians of water resources. Regardless, they also reveal the complexities and contradictions inherent in local systems of stewardship – complexities that are essential to understanding the broader waterscape of Bamboi and its layered governance structures.

6.4 Water bricolage: the interplay of localised and non-localised worldviews in water decision-making

This section examines the everyday interactions between the localised and non-localised worldviews that shape water decision-making in Bamboi. Drawing on Cleaver's (2002) theorisation of institutional bricolage, I adapt the concept as water bricolage to capture the hybrid and dynamic assemblage of practices, worldviews, and institutional arrangements through which water governance unfolds. Water bricolage attends to the ways in which formal institutions and customary systems – often framed as distinct or even incompatible within dominant water governance paradigms – are in practice interwoven, negotiated, and co-constitutive.

In Bamboi, the Koorafon and its river/water priesthood exemplify the internal, customary governance system that safeguards water through ritual authority, taboos, and cosmological accountability. These internal structures do not exist in isolation. They interact with the non-localised governance architectures, particularly the IWRM-aligned frameworks and mandates of the Government of Ghana, which centre service provision, infrastructure, and the technocratic regulation of water. It is through the everyday copresence and negotiation of these systems that water bricolage emerges: an ongoing assembling of “modern”/formal and “customary”/informal logics and practices that shape how water decisions are made, contested, and justified.

Although this hybridity is not formally recognised within the state's water governance strategy, it has evolved organically over time, with both internal and external actors adjusting their roles in ways that allow local practices and expectations to contour state-led interventions. Figure 48 illustrates the assemblage of attributes attached to these divergent water worldviews and governance pathways. As outlined earlier in Section 6.3.1, the Village Water Governance System

of Bamboi comprises internal and external pathways, each driven by distinct mandates. The internal pathway – anchored in Mo autochthonous rights and led by the Mokooro on behalf of the Koorafon – is grounded in cosmological legitimacy and ancestral stewardship. By contrast, the external pathway is shaped by the governmental agencies whose mandates derive from state legislation: the Bole District Assembly focuses on social service provision, while the BPA prioritises the uninterrupted ecological functioning of the BVR to sustain the Bui Dam’s operations.

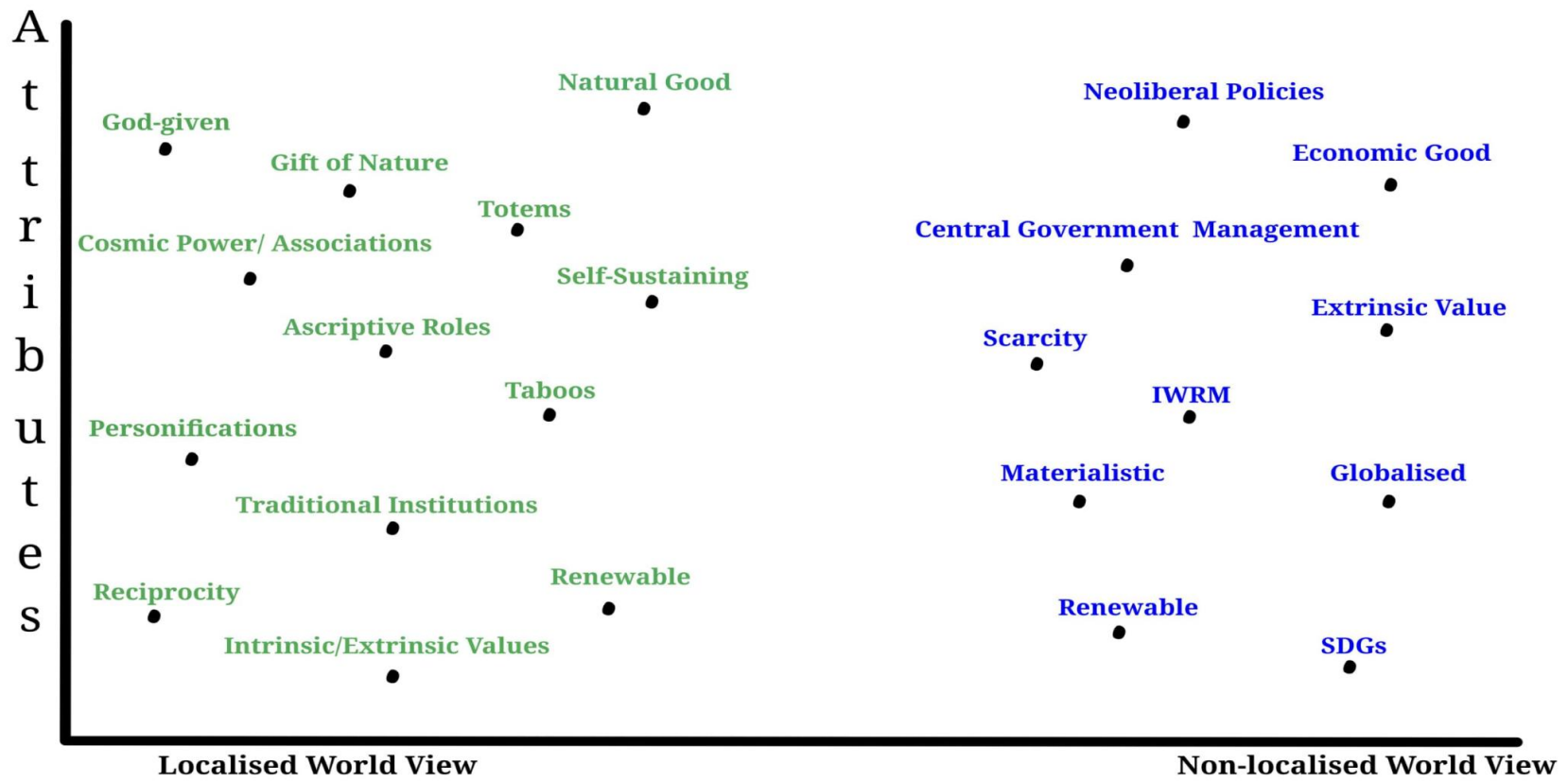


Figure 48: Attributes of the water bricolage in Bamboi

Source: Author's Construct.

These differing mandates produce contrasting worldviews of water. Within the localised worldview, water is a gift from Korowii/God, endowed with cosmic authority to reciprocate human actions or inactions. Natural resources – especially water – carry moral force, requiring human beings to act responsibly lest negative reciprocal consequences materialise. Governance is therefore enacted through ascriptive institutions such as the water priests, who maintain taboos, enforce prohibitions, and mediate between the physical and non-physical realms. The non-localised worldview is shaped by the institutional logic of the Government of Ghana, which is increasingly aligned with neoliberal framings of natural resources as economic goods governed to address scarcity. Within this paradigm, water is positioned within global resource governance agendas, especially the SDGs and IWRM, producing a governance orientation focused on efficiency, technical purification, infrastructure development, and standardised monitoring.

Despite the apparent disjuncture between these systems, the two worldviews continuously interact in everyday governance. It is within this interaction that water bricolage materialises. Attributes unique to each worldview become mutually implicated in decision-making processes. For instance, while the Bole District Assembly is primarily responsible for the construction of boreholes and the provision of potable water through chlorination and other technical procedures, its officers routinely rely on the performance of alcohol-based libation before commencing projects in Bamboi. Over time, these practices have produced a hybrid governance logic, where the initiation of water infrastructure – whether a borehole or a major national project like the Bamboi Bridge – often requires ritual consent from the customary authorities before technical work proceeds. In a Key Informant from the Koora family narrated a striking example that exemplifies this hybridity:

“During the initial attempts to construct the [Bamboi] bridge, all the machines that they brought had to break down at some point when they were still at the New Longoro side

[southwards]. It was until someone in New Longoro advised them to consult the then river priest for some sacrifices to precede, before they “white men” were able to cut some of the trees which were supposed to make way for the huge pillars which supports the bridge” (KII 3, fieldwork 2022).

This narrative underscores how attempts to implement “modern” infrastructure may stall until localised spiritual protocols are observed. Another member of the Koorafon expanded on these consequences:

“Even after they sought the consent of the river deity, the way some of the biggest and oldest onyina [*Ceiba pentandra*] were cut in the process drove the cosmic power of the BVR away. After that period, the things that could have been easily gotten in Bamboi such as the healing of the sick from petitioning the river deity had been compromised. [...]The elders had to consult some deities and perform a lot of rites before things started getting better” (KII 3, fieldwork 2022).

Here, the construction of the Bamboi Bridge temporarily disrupted the ecological and cosmological balance of the village, signalling a breach of safeguarding obligations toward the river’s surrounding ecology. However, after the necessary sacrificial rites were conducted, the construction proceeded uninterrupted. This illustrates that hybridisation between modern and localised practices does not inherently produce conflict; rather, it can create harmonised governance arrangements that accommodate both cosmological commitments and infrastructural imperatives.

Water bricolage, therefore, is not merely a conceptual abstraction but an observable practice within Bamboi’s waterscape. It captures how cosmological legitimacy, technical expertise, state authority,

and ancestral stewardship are woven together to govern water in ways that neither system could achieve alone.

6.4.1 Forms of water bricolage in Bamboi

Water bricolage in Bamboi manifests through multiple, overlapping forms that demonstrate how the village's water governance system is neither purely customary nor purely modern, but a negotiated assemblage of both. These forms reveal how local actors selectively draw upon, reinterpret, or fuse elements of different governance logics to address everyday needs, ecological uncertainties, and cosmological expectations.

First, ritual-technical hybridity is a central form of Bamboi's bricolage. Before borehole construction, mechanised water projects, or major infrastructural works such as the Bamboi Bridge, formal actors – including engineers, contractors, and District Assembly representatives – routinely participate in, or tacitly allow ritual practices such as libation, sacrifice, or the invocation of the BVR deity. These rituals are not viewed as competing with technical procedures but as necessary preconditions that ensure cosmic approval and avert spiritual or ecological repercussions. This hybrid practice exemplifies how spiritual authority accompanies – rather than opposes – technical expertise in Bamboi's waterscape.

Second, administrative-cosmological dualism emerges in routine decision-making. Whilst the Bole District Assembly is responsible for potable water provision, treatment, and infrastructure maintenance, the local residents often evaluate the safety, legitimacy, and acceptability of water systems through cosmological indicators such as river behaviour, totemic sightings, or ancestral dreams. These parallel systems shape the perceived efficacy of formal water interventions and influence their uptake, use, or contestation.

Third, plural systems of accountability operate simultaneously. Formal structures employ monitoring tools such as water quality testing or infrastructure audits. In contrast, the localised system invokes taboos, totems, the moral authority of the Koorafon, and the threat of cosmic consequences. This produces an accountability environment where state regulations coexist with spiritual sanctions, each capable of compelling behaviour in ways the other cannot.

Collectively, these forms of bricolage demonstrate that water governance in Bamboi is neither linear nor hierarchical, but an adaptive interface where actors rely on multiple institutional assemblage – practical, moral, spiritual, and technical – to manage water resources.

6.4.2 Tensions and negotiations between customary and state-led governance

The hybrid water governance landscape in Bamboi is not free from friction. Instead, tensions emerge from the divergent ontologies, mandates, and expectations embedded in the customary and state-led governance systems, which result in iterative negotiations that shape the evolving nature of the water bricolage. A primary tension stems from incompatible ontologies of water. For instance, the state conceptualises water as an economic good requiring technocratic regulation, commodification and infrastructural intervention – an orientation aligned with IWRM and SDG 6. Conversely, customary authorities view water as a moral, sentient, and ancestral entity requiring ritual maintenance. These ontologies diverge in their understanding of pollution, resource extraction, and accountability, leading to competing interpretations of what constitutes harm, risk, or “proper” management.

A second tension arises from jurisdictional ambiguities. The Koorafon claims autochthonous rights to safeguard water bodies, whilst state agencies claim legal authority derived from statutory mandates. In practice, these claims must be reconciled when major decisions – such as dam

management, borehole placement, or the construction of national infrastructure (such as the Bamboi Bridge) – affect the BVR or its ecosystem. Such negotiations often require the state to recognise, the authority of the water priesthood, even if not formally codified.

A third tension reflects uneven power and representation. State-led governance often prioritises efficiency and technical expertise, marginalising cosmological knowledge systems. However, customary actors hold legitimacy that state actors cannot replicate, especially during crises, spiritual disturbances, or culturally sensitive events. This uneven distribution of authority generates informal negotiations where each system strategically accommodates the other to maintain social harmony and institutional effectiveness.

These tensions do not undermine governance; rather, they actively produce the hybrid arrangements that define water bricolage in Bamboi. Negotiation, adaptation, and mutual recognition enable systems with fundamentally different worldviews to coexist and co-govern. The water bricolage in Bamboi therefore produces a governance landscape that is plural, dynamic, and relational. It deepens participation for some, limits it for others, and shapes power in ways that cannot be captured by formal policy frameworks alone. Understanding these implications is crucial for interpreting how water governance works in practice, and for assessing the limits of universalised models such as IWRM or SDG-driven frameworks of governance.

6.5 Conclusion of the chapter

This chapter has addressed the third research question by illuminating how local and customary institutions in Bamboi interact – sometimes deliberately, other times unintentionally – with formal water governance institutions. Through the analytic lens of water bricolage, the chapter has demonstrated that water governance in Bamboi is not a dualistic arrangement of “traditional”

versus “modern” systems, but an evolving, negotiated, and hybridised assemblage of practices. These practices reflect the deep entanglement of cosmological authority, customary stewardship, state-led technocracy, and everyday lived realities in shaping how water resources are accessed, safeguarded, and interpreted in the village.

The first concluding insight concerns the cosmovision that underpins the localised governance of natural water resources. In Bamboi, water is embedded within a supernatural order linking Korowii/God, the ancestors, and the living. This relational ontology situates water as both a livelihood resource and a moral-cosmic entity capable of reciprocating human actions – positively or negatively. As shown throughout the chapter, practices such as tabooing, totemism, and annual/spontaneous sanctification are not mere ritual performances; they are mechanisms of accountability and stewardship in which residents protect water not only for worldly survival but also for their obligations to the ancestral realm. Within this cosmological framing, safeguarding water becomes a matter of eternal consequence, and the governance of water reflects a moral economy that Westernised models of development often fail to acknowledge.

This perspective reinforces broader critiques advanced by scholars of cultural relativism (Lee, 2021; Msuya, 2017; Mignolo, 2012; Brown, 2008), who warn that universalised frameworks for natural resource governance frequently overlook or erase the epistemologies and worldviews of local settlement. In Bamboi, embedded systems of cultural accountability provide powerful avenues for sustainable resource management – avenues that remain invisible within technocratic paradigms such as IWRM or SDG 6.

The second concluding insight stems from the interaction between localised and non-localised worldviews, which produces hybrid forms of “good” water governance in practice. Whilst the

water priesthood's safeguarding actions are anchored in Mo cosmology, the District Assembly and the Bui Power Authority operate from state mandates grounded in efficiency, infrastructure delivery, and the protection of national assets such as the Bui Dam. The chapter's analysis of the Bamboi Bridge construction vividly illustrates that, despite their contrasting premises, these systems frequently intersect in significant ways. Engineers, contractors, and state actors have – sometimes unintentionally – relied on local ritual systems to navigate infrastructural challenges. Such interactions constitute the hybrid governance that Haider and Cleaver (2023); Merrey and Cook (2012), Cleaver (2002; 2001) conceptualise as institutional bricolage, where actors repurpose available collection of norms, practices, and authorities to address complex challenges. In Bamboi, the convergence of ritual authority and technocratic practice forms a pragmatic and often necessary pathway for water governance.

Finally, the chapter has shown that water in Bamboi is persistently personified and gendered, shaping both its symbolic meaning and material appropriation – similar to the arguments of Nowak et al. (2024), Strang (2023), Kramm (2020) and Awuah-Nyamekye (2013) elsewhere. Residents' framing of the BVR as feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral reflects long-standing cultural interpretations of water's behaviour, provision, and moral agency. Whilst feminine imaginaries emphasise the nurturing, provisioning aspects of water – similar to Awuah-Nyamekye's (2013) findings in Berekum – such framings also risk legitimising overextraction by normalising water as an ever-giving maternal resource. Masculine and neutral framings, by contrast, emphasise power, discipline, and cosmic consequence, thus promoting more cautious and respectful engagement. These gendered readings of water serve as an important entry point for understanding the gendered dynamics of water governance, which the next chapter explores more directly.

Cumulatively, the evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that Bamboi's water governance is fundamentally hybrid, relational, spiritual, and negotiated. Neither customary nor state-led institutions alone can account for the governance outcomes observed in the village. Instead, it is the assemblage – the bricolage – of cosmological stewardship, formal institutional authority, gendered interpretations, and everyday interactions that shape the waterscape of Bamboi. Understanding this hybridity is essential for rethinking dominant development frameworks that continue to rely on universalised assumptions about governance, participation, and gender.

Building on these insights, Chapter Seven turns to the final research question by examining how Bamboi's local and customary institutions are gendered, both in structure and in practice. The chapter unpacks the historical evolution of women's organising, the cultural and spiritual logics underpinning the female water priesthood, and the broader gendered narratives that shape authority, power, and participation in water governance. By grounding this analysis in African feminist and FPE thought, Chapter Seven challenges universalised Western imaginaries of African women and illustrates how gendered agency, voice, and governance are negotiated within Bamboi's unique cultural, spiritual, and institutional landscape.

CHAPTER SEVEN

7 Gendered cosmologies, power and water governance: An (African) feminist political ecology of Bamboi

7.0 Introduction

This chapter examines the situatedness of African feminisms and FPE within the gendered governance of water in Bamboi. It extends the intersectional analysis advanced in the previous chapters by foregrounding how power, hierarchy, lineage and cosmological authority shape gendered participation in water decision-making. In doing so, the chapter directly addresses the fourth research question: how are local and customary institutions gendered?

Storytelling remains central in this chapter not only as a methodological tool but as a decolonial framing. Decolonial scholarship demonstrates that storytelling is foundational to nature-bound research because it locates environmental relations within lived experiences, affective histories, and embodied ontologies (Alqaisiya, 2024; Glynn and Cupples, 2024; Ortiz, 2023). Within FPE, storytelling functions as an epistemic gateway to situated knowledge, unbundling how resource governance is practiced, narrated, and contested (Ekowati et al., 2023), from within local frames of meaning and worldviews. Consequently, this chapter intentionally weaves together stories circulating in Bamboi – stories about gender, water, power, silence, and spiritual authority – to surface the nuanced ways in which water governance is felt, practised, and rationalised.

Central to the chapter is an exploration of the gendered institutions that organise water governance in the village. These include the stool of the water priestess, Koora Yaa Kumah, whose ritual, spiritual and social roles in governing the BVR (Nnaa Moo) demonstrate a form female authority that unsettles universalised assumptions about African women's marginality. The chapter also

examines local gendered and cosmological framings that ascribe personality and fluid gender characters to the BVR – how residents perceive the river as feminine, masculine, or both, and how these shifting imaginaries regulate the relationship, extraction, conduct, obligations, and moral accountability around water in the village.

Further drawing on African feminisms, the chapter unpacks the historical evolution and decline of the Women's Committee of Bamboi. The WoC's past adjudicatory power, capacity to mobilise compliance, and ability to influence the village's affairs would unsettle Eurocentric and Westernised narratives that portray African women as passive, oppressed, or lacking political agency. Instead, the WoC reflects African feminist logics of complementarity, negotiation and organically emanating context-specific power.

The chapter also unveils the strategic use of silence in Bamboi. Silence emerges as a tool through which residents – men and women alike – resist, contest, or protect themselves from the consequences of speaking openly in public forums. Practices such as name-calling and shaming discipline overt assertiveness, revealing a local politics of voice that is not inherently gendered but deeply entrenched in social expectations, respectability norms, and the desire to maintain communal harmony.

Finally, the chapter turns to the influence of Westernised gender mainstreaming on local narratives. Through the strategy of the Bole District Assembly, Bamboi has internalised elements of externally driven gender discourses, particularly that idea that *“water issues are women issue”*. However, as the empirical material in this chapter would show, this narrative contrasts sharply with everyday realities, where gendered authority, responsibility, and participation are shaped less by universal gender norms and lean towards lineage, seniority, spiritual legitimacy, and intersectional social positioning.

7.1 The contradictions between gendered public narratives and actual practices on water decisions

Scholars, including Sultana (2021), Tamale (2020), Truelove (2019), Narayanaswamy (2016; 2014), and Rocheleau and Nirmal (2015), have roundly criticized the dominance of Western-centred feminist discourses and how they travel into non-Western settings, shaping gender narratives in ways that often obscure local complexities. Their collective critique highlights how externally constructed gender imaginaries, especially those rooted in numerical representation and essentialised assumptions about “women’s issues”, can distort policy, public discourse and everyday practices. This section draws on these critiques to unpack two related contradictions in Bamboi: the first focuses on the disjuncture between public narratives about gender and water, and the actual practices of water decision-making and the second reveals the gender mainstreaming drive and strategy of the Bole District Assembly, which mirrors national SDG-driven approaches (led by the NDPC) that often rely on representational simplicity rather than contextual nuance. The rest of the section analyse how externally shaped gender discourses filter into Bamboi’s life, influencing how residents speak about gender, even when their own practices contradict those narratives.

During the first month of the fieldwork, introductory interactions with the village were frequently met with surprise that men were being included in a study about gender and water. Many respondents reproduced a dominant village mantra: “*water issues are female issues*”. This phrase appeared repeatedly, surfacing in informal conversations under trees, interactions in compounds and even in interviews. For instance, a participant in an informal conversation with a group of men who sat under the shade of a mango tree at the south-western side of the village casually put it:

“Oh, if it is about water, then speak to the females [...]” (Participant A, fieldwork 2022).

However, once the intersectional framing of the study was explained and a few probing questions were introduced, the same men, including Participant A, who had initially distanced themselves from water governance started detailing their active involvement in water-related decisions and processes of safeguarding the BVR. This shift, from distancing to claiming involvement, reveals a tension between discursive performance and everyday practice in Bamboi. For example, Participant B, a young unemployed university-trained Mo man offered a vivid account of how he and other men actively monitor and restrict “suspicious” non-residents from accessing the BVR. Despite the river being effectively open-access resource, riverside spaces are monitored informally to prevent ritual actions for supernatural request or appreciation³⁰, some of which are deemed harmful to the village. He expressed the following:

“Oh, if this is what you are researching, then, I can tell you that all of us seated here [making a hand gesture] are in one way or the other involved in water issues. [...] some of us here [...] have even followed up on ensuring we get access to government-supplied water system [...] like what is at New Longoro [...] Usually, if you do not find me here, I will be there [by the Bamboi Bridge...] to ensure that non-residents descending the steep to the river are interrogated. [...] We sometimes alert the river priest or “Rasta” to ensure the suspected people are not going to do any “unwanted” there thing there [...]” (Participant B, fieldwork 2022).

³⁰ In Chapter Six, I revealed that people assume the BVR/ Nnaa Moo possesses the supernatural ability to answer requests they make personally or through the river priests of Bamboi to the river’s cosmic authority. These people would later return to appreciate the deity when their petitions manifest physically as answers.

In these accounts, men's roles in lobbying for improved water infrastructure, protecting the BVR, and enforcing taboos become evident, contradiction the public claim that water is exclusively "female issue".

This narrative gap also extended to some male key informants such as palace elders. A male Muslim and palace elder, approximately 90 years old, initially repeated the local narrative, "*nsuo ho asem deε, bisa mmaa no*", literally, "as for water-related issues, ask the females", but quickly reversed position when asked how he would pray without water for ablution – in a defensive, and yet jovial manner, he narrated the following:

"Ah! [an expression of disarray] if prayer is due and you hide under the guise of being a male not to go out to fetch water [...], it is up to you!" (KII 5, fieldwork 2022).

These swift reversals illustrate that public narratives about gender and water function more as rhetorical acts than as accurate reflections of gendered responsibility and practice. When scrutinised through lived realities, gendered responsibilities in Bamboi are more fluid, intersecting with age, religious obligations, household needs, and practical access to water sources. Regardless, interviews and observations with adult women reinforced that their main concern revolves around the availability of water for household use. Many rely on adolescent daughters, private tricycle operators, or women traders who transport water from the BVR with basins. However, the ethnography revealed that contracting water is a "privilege"³¹, inaccessible to many households. At the same time, the installation of household water facilities such as hand-dug wells or boreholes was overwhelmingly driven by adult men in those households. This again challenges the notion

³¹ Women with the financial ability to afford. Contracting for 140 litres of water from the BVR could cost Ghc 30 (£2.50).

that “water issues” squarely belong to women; instead, gendered roles are complex, sometimes shared, complementary and deeply intertwined with socio-economic dynamics.

Initially, I attributed the quick shifts in men’s responses to my own phrasing of questions. However, over time it became evident that the public gender discourse in Bamboi has been significantly shaped by NGO interventions and the gender mainstreaming frameworks promoted by the Bole District Assembly – all of which draw heavily from SDG 5 and SDG 6. These external interventions have produced a discursive conditioning effect, where villagers repeat gender mainstreaming slogans that do not align with their everyday practices. The phrase “water issues are female issues” reflects this adoption of external narratives rather than local realities. This finding was confirmed in series of interviews with local government staffs of the Bole District Assembly. For instance, in a KII with one of the Assembly’s staff at the Planning Department, he narrated the following as the district’s gender agenda and how that shapes gender mainstreaming in water decision-making:

“We just want to see women in community engagements and the various community committees [...] our gender focus [...] is just seeing women there. At the stage we are in, we do not necessarily look at the expertise” (Government Staff 1, fieldwork 2022).

This admission highlights that the District Assembly’s gender mainstreaming agenda is primarily representational, focused on counting women (which brings WID and its pitfalls back into practice), rather than ensuring meaningful or contextually grounded participation. FPE and African feminisms are particularly useful for diagnosing the limitations in the district’s approach. These frameworks argue that representation alone does not produce equity, because women’s ability to participate is shaped by intersecting identities (age, lineage, marital status, religion, class);

counting bodies does not dismantle power structures that perpetuate strategic exclusions; overreliance on gender quotas relieves and obscures state actors of accountability for structural failures in service delivery; and water scarcity cannot be resolved by adding women to committees if technical, financial, and political capacity gaps remain unaddressed. Thus, the District Assembly’s representational logic inadvertently shifts responsibility for poor water service onto women, masking deeper governance issues, an outcome widely critiqued in gender-and-water scholarship (Kolipaka et al., 2026; Cleaver and Hamada, 2010).

The contradiction between public narratives and the actual practices of water governance in Bamboi highlights how gender is performed, negotiated, and strategically deployed rather than fixed or naturally assigned. These discursive tensions set the stage for a deeper exploration of how gendered authority is institutionally organised, spiritually legitimised, and socially reproduced within customary structures. The next section therefore turns to one of the most significant gendered institutions in Bamboi – the stool of the water/river priestess – to examine how spiritual authority, lineage, and ritual responsibility shape the gendered governance of the many waters of the village.

7.2 The stool of the Water/River Priestess “Koora Yaa Kuma” and water decision-making

In Bamboi, the stool of the water/river priestess is deeply revered among the female members of the Koorafon, the lineage entrusted with safeguarding the BVR and its spiritual authority. As discussed in Chapter Six, each Mo gate possesses distinct custodial responsibilities, and the Koorafon’s mandate over the water priesthood situates its female members at the heart of the village’s cosmological governance. Through this responsibility, the water priestess, Koora Yaa Kumah, embodies a locally grounded form of female authority that challenges universalised

assumptions in Western and Eurocentric feminist thought. Whilst dominant narratives often portray African women in patriarchal settings as passive or structurally disempowered (Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 1997; Amadiume, 1987), Bamboi demonstrates that female agency emerges through context-specific epistemologies, cosmologies, and kinship structures that shape moral authority, legitimacy, and decision-making power (Nnaemeka, 2004; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994).

The water priestess is not merely a symbolic figure; she is a central authority in the spiritual and physical governance of the BVR and, by extension, all water sources in Bamboi, as explained in the framing of water lineage (see Section 6.2). Her role embodies the relational, cosmological, and affective dimensions of water governance that FPE foregrounds (Sultana, 2021; Truelove, 2019). Her stool functions simultaneously as a cosmological office, a gendered institution, and a water governance mechanism through which the village negotiates its relationship with the river, ancestors, and broader ecological forces. She participates in annual and spontaneous sanctification processes, interprets cosmological messages signalling purity or misfortune, and co-leads key rituals with the Mokooro (water priest), often preparing the ritual grains or carrying out gender-specific ritual responsibilities.

Within the hierarchy of the water priesthood, the Mokooro is recognized as the custodian of the sacred staff³² of the river stool and the primary officiant of ritual sanctifications. However, the water priestess, positioned directly after him, articulates her authority with clarity and confidence. During one of my early visits, she asserted this vividly:

³² Physical sceptre of the priesthood authority and legitimacy.

“It is not Kwabena [referring to the local name of my native research assistant] who needed to bring you here. Kwabena Fre [referring to the water priest, Mokooro] should have held your hand and brought you here” (KII 6, fieldwork 2023).

This remark was not casual. It was delivered as she sat upright in the shade of her compound, wrapped in a simple cloth – her frail frame, worn by recent illness, contrasting sharply with the forcefulness of her tone. Her eyes held a mixture of humour and insistence, signalling her conviction that protocol, respect, and authority had been breached. She was reminding both the Mokooro and me that she was not a subordinate but an equal who must be approached with due reverence. Thus, her compound (as shown in Figure 50) itself became a site of governance, which needed the reverence and protocols to be approached by me, an “outsider”.

Despite the subtle power contestations, both priests repeatedly affirmed that they co-led the river’s sanctification rituals – annual and spontaneous – except during periods of ill-health. She explained their complementary labour:

“Until recently when I fell sick, I was always with Kwabena Fre in anything relating to the river’s sanctification. [...] it is because I am sick and immobile that I have stayed aback” (KII 6, fieldwork 2023).

Her assertiveness reflects the accumulated authority she has gained through age, ritual knowledge, kinship, and personal disposition. At nearly two decades older than the Mokooro, she spoke with the measured assurance typical of respected elders in Bamboi. Her authority is not simply gendered; it is intersectionally constructed.

This dynamic resonates strongly with Oyewumi’s (1997) critique of Western feminist assumptions that treat biological sex as the primary organising principle of African societies. In Yoruba contexts,

Oyewumi (1997) argues that seniority – not gender – is often more significant in structuring social relations. The water priestess embodies this argument: her authority over the younger male priest emerged not through womanhood, but through seniority, kinship position, and ritual legitimacy. However, as Bakare-Yusuf (2004) cautions, seniority alone does not guarantee power; it becomes consequential only when it intersects with lineage, charisma, ritual knowledge, and social reputation. This nuance is clearly visible in Bamboi: not all older women command authority, and not all younger men defer. The priestess's influence stems from a constellation of factors – her Koorafon lineage, gendered ritual responsibilities, long history in sanctification rites, personality, and her recognition within the river-based cosmological system.

Whilst the Bole District Assembly's formal water governance frameworks (Section 7.1) rely heavily on Westernised gender-mainstreaming agendas that emphasise numerical representation, the authority of Koora Yaa Kumah emerges through spiritual legitimacy and customary mandate – not through quota-driven inclusion. Thus, the stool of the priestess reveals a form of gendered governance in which power is relational, situated, and cosmologically anchored. This alternative ontology challenges the narrow lens through which gender mainstreaming is framed in IWRM and SDG practice and highlights the limits of external governance frameworks in capturing locally meaningful forms of authority and structuring.

The rest of this section is structured into two parts: subsection 7.2.1 examines how the water priestess is selected, highlighting the intricate interplay of kinship, personality, and ritual endorsement and subsection 7.2.2 explores her everyday and ceremonial roles, situating her authority within the wider waterscape and governance practices of Bamboi.

7.2.1 Selecting the water/river priestess

The water priestess is selected exclusively from among the women of the Koorafon. The priestesshood rotates across the various nuclear families within the extended Koorafon, ensuring that the role is perpetual and that ritual responsibility circulates among eligible family lines. Once a priestess completes her tenure (usually after her demise) or becomes unable to continue, succession passes to the next nuclear family designated within the lineage rotation.

Although multiple characteristics are considered essential for selecting a male water priest, the criteria for selecting a priestess are grounded in a slightly different set of expectations. A potential priestess must belong to the Koorafon; express willingness to take up the role; demonstrate commitment to the spiritual and physical sanctification of the BVR; and exhibit personal character traits deemed appropriate for the spiritual obligations of the position. These characteristics are not rigid; rather, they are fluid and context-dependent, shaped by both lineage expectations and the village's perceptions. However, they constitute the core constructs through which suitability for priestesshood is evaluated.

As shown earlier in Chapter Six (Figure 42), the broader processes governing inclusion and exclusion within the water priesthood reflect a carefully curated balance of lineage-based entitlement, ritual knowledge, and social accountability. Building on this, Figure 49 illustrates the specific pathways through which the priestess is selected from among eligible women in the Koorafon.

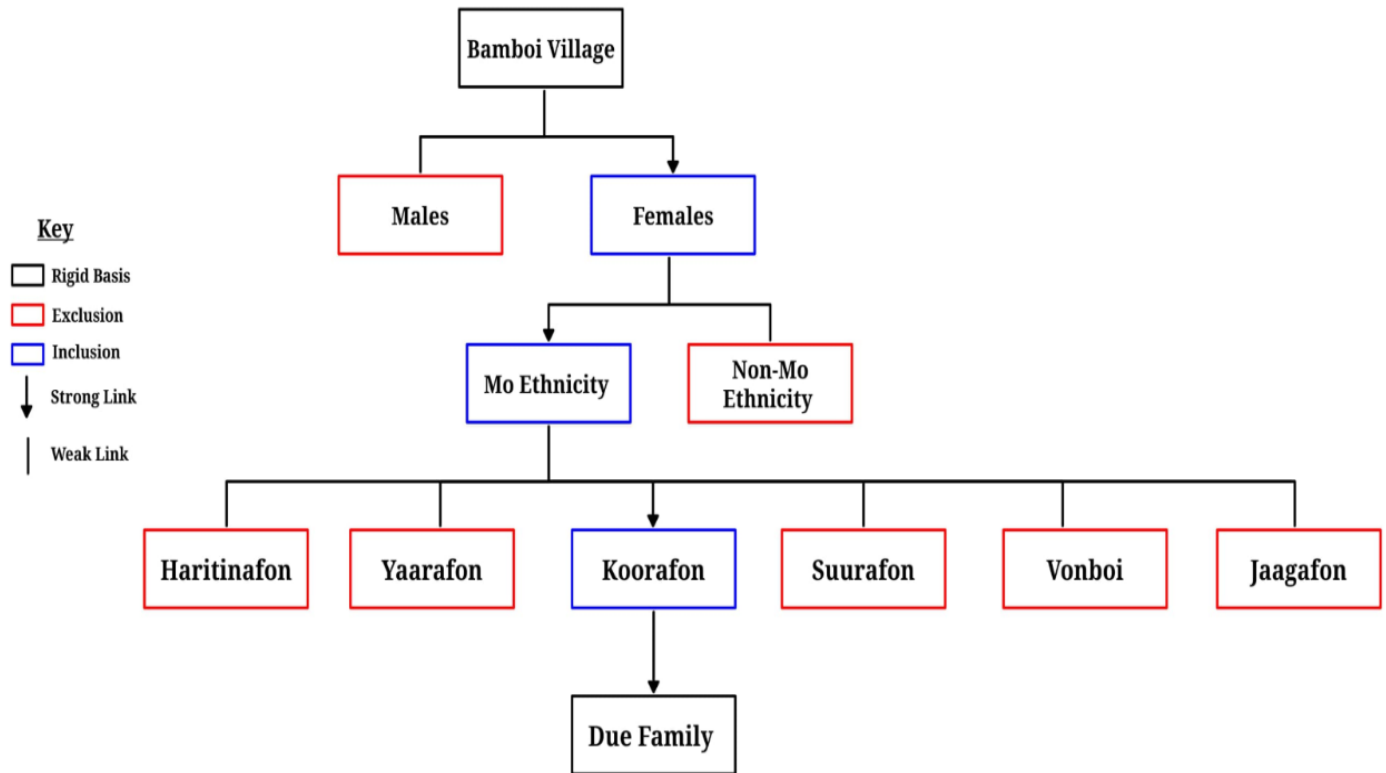


Figure 49: Phases of selecting the river/water priestess of Bamboi

Source: Author's construct.

These selection processes highlight how gendered spiritual authority in Bamboi is intricately tied to kinship, cosmology, and institutional memory, rather than to universalised notions of gender roles or leadership.

7.2.2 The role of the water/river priestess

The role of Koora Yaa Kumah, the water priestess of Bamboi, illustrates the deeply gendered yet relationally grounded nature of ritual authority within the Koorafon. As established in Chapter Six (Section 6.2), the water priest occupies the position of chief custodian of the staff, rituals, and protocols that safeguard the BVR. However, the priestess's responsibilities – performed consistently for over two decades – are equally fundamental to the sanctification process and to the broader moral and social ordering of the village's waterscape.

Her core ritual duty centres on preparing a sacred blend of locally cultivated grains – millet, maize, rice, beans, and sorghum – which the water priest sprinkles on the river deity positioned at the northwestern bank of the BVR. This grain preparation is not a peripheral act but a symbolic and cosmological anchor of the ritual. It functions simultaneously as an offering of thanksgiving, an enactment of reciprocity, and an embodied expression of the village’s dependence on water for agricultural, spiritual, and nutritional sustenance. Through this act, the priestess mediates between the material staples of everyday life in Bamboi and the metaphysical expectations of Korowii and the ancestors, reinforcing the principle that water, food, and cosmology are co-produced and mutually sustaining.



Figure 50: The stool of the Koora Yaa Kumah (water priestess) at her residence

Source: Fieldwork, 2023.

My engagement with the priestess revealed that her ritual responsibilities constitute only one dimension of her authority. As hankoor (female elder) of the Koor gate, she also plays a pivotal role in the social life of Bamboi. Her reflections highlight how ritual authority and social leadership are intertwined. She revealed the following:

“What would I be doing on the other days of the year? The river sanctification is basically planned and accomplished in a short period, usually within a month [...] I use the rest of the time to ensure other things are done for the village [...] Before I became immobile due to ill-health, I was very active and enthused about leading and joining initiatives for females in the village. Look, I was very involved in lobbying the construction and management of the women training centre down the road here [...]. I was involved in other village activities but for the sake of sickness [wiping tears from her eyes as she shared her stories]” (Water Priestess, fieldwork 2023).

Her leadership extended notably into female apprenticeship and skills development programmes, particularly the establishment and management of *Nontoma*, the industrial training centre for young women in Bamboi. The water priestess thus embodied a form of gendered authority that is simultaneously spiritual, organisational, and developmental. A Koorafon elder affirmed her assertiveness and village-wide influence in a KII:

“[...] see, it is because she is sick that is why you have not seen a lot of her. She is very powerful and does not give up easily on things she stands for” (KII 2, fieldwork 2023).

These narratives complicate homogenising assumptions embedded in mainstream feminist and development discourses, especially those influenced by Western paradigms that cast African women as uniformly marginal, passive, or in need of external “empowerment.” The lived

experiences of Koora Yaa Kumah contest such epistemic simplifications. Her authority emerges not from externally defined empowerment frameworks but from locally recognised forms of capability, ritual legitimacy, seniority, kinship membership, and demonstrated commitment to communal welfare.

This aligns with African feminist critiques (for example, Bedigen, 2022; Bedigen et al., 2021) that argue for contextually rooted definitions of empowerment – those derived from local histories, cosmologies, and setting-specific expectations rather than externally imposed models. The water priestess’s position exemplifies how African feminist thought suture together relationality, communal responsibility, and situated agency, rather than the individualistic and adversarial modes often central to Western feminisms (Steady, 1987). Her story also resonates with FPE’s assertion that women’s environmental authority is situated, intersectional, embodied, and historically constituted, rather than reducible to categorical notions of “women’s inclusion.” Her authority emerges through ritual expertise, ancestry, seniority, and moral standing, all of which shape access to decision-making within Bamboi’s waterscape.

This section has demonstrated that gender in Bamboi’s water governance is neither binary nor universal. Rather, it is fluid, negotiated, relational, and deeply entangled with cosmology, kinship, and local histories – challenging mainstream, Western-centred imaginaries of gender and participation. The selection processes and ritual responsibilities of the water priestess reveal a gendered institution that assigns spiritual agency, influence, and village leadership through lineage and cosmological legitimacy. However, beyond individual roles, the gendering of water governance in Bamboi is also embedded within the metaphoric meanings ascribed to the Black Volta River itself. The next section therefore turns to the metaphoric gender of the BVR/Nnaa

Moo and examines how the river’s personhood and gendered attributes shape authority, obligation, and power.

7.3 The metaphoric gender of the Black Volta River — “Nnaa Moo”

My formative years as a young girl in the Ashanti Region were shaped by norms, traditions and mythologies embedded in stories, music, games, proverbs, adages, folktales, and folklore. Although these cultural narratives were entertaining, they were also vehicles for moral instruction – teaching “good” behaviours and discouraging “bad” conduct. Growing up and schooling closer to Manhyia (the palace community of the Asantehene³³) meant that such stories were an intimate part of my childhood, shaping how I related to both people and the physical environment. Stories about water bodies were sacred. I still vividly remember the folktale of Abena³⁴:

“Abena was a lazy teenager who usually woke up late to fetch water from the riverside for her household. Despite being advised by friends, relatives, and neighbours, Abena never listened and continued with her habit of arriving late at the river for water. Due to this behaviour, Abena struggled to carry her pot of water and often relied on assistance from strangers passing by. One day, when Abena was struggling to get assistance, a big catfish appeared from the river and offered to help her. ‘It’ was able to perform human functions such as speaking and walking, so it assured Abena it would help her but asked only that she spare its life afterward. But after it helped her, ungrateful Abena grabbed and killed the catfish and headed home. Certain it was dead; she cooked it for food. Regardless of being cooked on fire, the fish continued to talk and sing about Abena’s ungratefulness. Everyone

³³ The traditional leader of the Asante tribe, among the Akan ethnic group of Ghana.

³⁴ An automatic Asante/Akan name for females born on Tuesday. Kwabena refers to males born on the same day. This automatic day-born naming has spread to several places in Ghana. An example is the use of *Kwabena Fre* to describe the Water Priest by the Water Priestess in 7.2.

refused to eat the food she prepared. Soon, Abena fell seriously sick and died because it was believed she had killed a ‘child’ of the river.”

Abena’s story, much like the Berekum narratives about River Koraa’s “children” (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2013), is not a simple folktale. It reveals how rivers and aquatic beings are conceptualised as sentient, moral, and socially embedded entities within Ghanaian cosmologies. The catfish’s actions including speaking, negotiating, offering help, and later “singing” its grievance, reflect a worldview in which water bodies possess agency and emotional capacity. To harm a river’s “child” is to violate the moral contract between humans and non-human entities, leading to consequences that are ecological, spiritual, and social. From FPE perspective, the story demonstrates how environmental governance is enacted through affect, obligation, reciprocity, and cosmological accountability, rather than purely through technocratic rules (Sultana, 2021; Truelove, 2019). The river “punishes” Abena not because she is female, but because she violates relational ethics – a principle that mirrors how BVR/Nnaa Moo is believed to reward or reprimand the residents of Bamboi based on their conduct (see Chapter Six).

Through the lens of African feminisms, this narrative performs an epistemic function: it encodes environmental, moral, and social knowledge in ways that resist Western assumptions that African stories are “mythical” or “non-rational.” Instead, such stories articulate an ontology of responsibility and interdependence (Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 1997; Amadiume, 1987). Whilst Abena’s labour was gendered, her punishment was not; the lesson applies to anyone – male or female – who fails to honour the moral obligations embedded in human-water relations. This nuance aligns with the broader argument of this chapter: gender in Bamboi’s waterscape is fluid, situational, and relational, not rigidly tied to biological sex.

The emphasis on the river's "children" further reinforces the concept of *water lineage* discussed in Chapter Six, where water bodies are treated as kin, possessing rights, feelings, and the capacity to reciprocate human action. Thus, this folktale functions as an informal governance mechanism, instilling respect for water, regulating behaviour at water sources, and reinforcing the cosmological order through narrative. This framing sets the stage for the subsequent discussion of the metaphoric gender of the BVR – a gendering that is fluid, negotiable, and dependent on the river's perceived performance in residents' everyday lives.

A significant dimension of the personified worldview of surface water bodies in Bamboi is the question of gender. Some village residents construct the BVR as a female, invoking metaphors of motherhood, nourishment, and care. For instance, in an informal conversation with a 65-year-old female trader born and raised in Bamboi, she revealed the following narrative:

"The water is a female because of its motherhood affection. It has revealed itself to some people as female and I believe it is a female because of how it provides for the people in this village. If you hear "...boi" [affectionate short form of Bamboi], everything about it is connected to the river" (VR 2, fieldwork 2022).

This maternal framing echoes the nurturing and life-giving properties widely associated with water. However, Oyewumi (2003) would disagree with VR 2 because she argues that "motherhood" is a relational and socially produced role rather than a biologically fixed female identity, challenging the automatic gendering of caregiving as feminine. This critique is especially relevant in Bamboi, where alternative narratives complicate this feminine characterisation.

For instance, a second-generation³⁵ member of the WoC, now aged 70, shared an oral history involving an elderly woman was believed to be a physical manifestation of the river:

“[...] Our grandfather [referring to the first lead-settler of the present Mo natives] met a very old woman living all alone in the village. She guided him and taught him the dos and don'ts of the river. He returned one day on his routine visits to her, she had buried herself in the ground [...] For her to have lived here all alone and buried herself the way she did, we suspect she was not just a human but a physical manifestation of the river” (VR 9, fieldwork 2022).

In triangulating the narrative of VR 9, I engaged KII 2 who affirmed this story, revealing that libation is still poured in her honour. These narratives reinforce the idea of the river as an elder woman – powerful, ancestral, protective, and spiritually authoritative:

“[...] It is true. Our grandfather met a very old lady here. She had even warned our grandfather not to travel further as there is a big river few metres ahead of where she stayed. Till today, we pour libation in her honour as part of our ancestral clan” (KII 2, fieldwork 2022).

Conversely, other residents depict the BVR as male and masculine, emphasising its power to reprimand, discipline, and “take life”. A Key Informant of a non-Koorra gate revealed the following:

“As for me, I believe the river is a male. I cannot just say that because people rely on it, it is a female. Fathers in Bamboi here are supposed to be providers so I cannot only attribute people's dependence on the river as enough reason to see it as feminine. What has become

³⁵ The group of WoC members that immediately succeeded the pioneers.

quite clear is how it can drown both residents and visitors. It is a man that can reprimand both his children and outsiders” (KII 1, fieldwork 2022).

Meanwhile, another set of villagers view the BVR as possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics, shifting form depending on the context. In an in-depth interview with an 80-year-old former Unit Committee chairman of Bamboi (an elected local government role), he revealed the following:

“Since you are doing water research, you might have heard that this river does not flow straight. Instead, it bends and curves as it pleases. Even though its colour [floor] assumes a black feature here [referring to the Black Volta River], at another point, it becomes white [referring to the White Volta River] and at another, it becomes reddish [referring to the Red Volta River]. [...] In the same way, it decides when to show motherly characteristics and when to show male ones” (VR 4, fieldwork 2022).

Here, gender is not a fixed identity but a fluid, context-dependent manifestation, aligning with African feminist scholarship. Oyewumi (2003) and Amadiume (1987) reject rigid Western gender binaries, arguing that African social organisation often centres on roles, seniority, and personhood rather than the biological categories of male/female. Bamboi’s narratives mirror this fluidity: the river becomes masculine when associated with strength, withdrawal, protection, or danger; feminine when associated with nurturing, cleansing, or emotional resonance; and beyond-gender when seen as a supernatural entity not reducible to human categories.

These shifting gender attributions do more than describe the river – they regulate behaviour. The metaphoric gender of the BVR functions as an informal governance framework that shapes access, use, and moral obligations. If the river is imagined as a mother, it must be treated with respect,

nurtured, and protected. If imagined as a father, it is feared, obeyed, and approached cautiously. When perceived as androgynous or beyond-gender, the emphasis shifts toward cosmic accountability and ritual propriety. In each case, these identities shape how residents carry out their stewardship obligations, how they interpret danger or misfortune, and how they enforce taboos around extraction, fishing, bathing, or visiting the BVR. These echo FPE argument that resource governance is infused with emotional, symbolic, and relational meanings – not merely technical or hydrological.

The fluid ontology of the BVR highlights the limitations of the IWRM imaginations. IWRM imagines water as a stable, measurable, apolitical resource governed through technocratic regulation, markets, and infrastructure. But in Bamboi, water is a living entity embedded in social, spiritual, and cosmological systems. Its governance cannot be reduced to universalised metrics or managerial interventions. The doubts raised by Evaristo et al. (2023) and Biswas (2008) about the applicability of IWRM in diverse cultural settings become palpable here: technocratic universality collapses in the face of situated, relational, and shifting ontologies.

This section therefore contributes theoretically by demonstrating how gender fluidity, cosmology, and personhood – core concerns of African feminisms and FPE – produce governance effects that cannot be captured within mainstream water policy frameworks. It affirms the need for governance models that recognise dynamic, negotiated, and culturally grounded knowledge systems rather than assuming universal, neoliberal, or apolitical regimes of resource management (Joshi et al., 2024).

Having established how the river's gendered personhood produces informal governance logics, the next section turns to the institutional domain: how Bamboi's localised and customary gendered

structures intersect with, challenge, and negotiate the external frameworks introduced by the state. Section 7.4 therefore moves from the symbolic and cosmological dimensions of gendered water governance to the institutional and political processes through which gender and power are operationalised in practice.

7.4 African feminism organising: the organic evolution of the Bamboi Women’s Committee

In this session, I draw on African feminisms to unpack the agency of the now-defunct Women’s Committee of Bamboi – a women’s group that emerged organically from a group of economically successful, middle-aged Mo women who traded along the peripheries of the Bamboi Bridge. Their evolution into an authoritative body that adjudicated “fair” justice in Bamboi directly challenges the overly simplistic portrayals of African women as passive, dependent, or lacking agency – portrayals critiqued widely in African feminist scholarship (Amaefula, 2021; Coetzee, 2017). Instead, the WoC’s history demonstrates that African women’s agency is often embedded in culturally rooted organising, economic leverage, and moral legitimacy rather than externally imposed empowerment frameworks.

The WoC of Bamboi, affectionately referred to in the settlement as han/mmaa (women’s) committee is remembered as one of the village’s most influential social institutions. Although it is no longer exists, the residents described it as “effective” in managing disputes and maintaining social order in the village. The committee was a make-up of Mo women who operated trading stalls along the BVR, a strategic location that positioned them as everyday monitors of river-related activities. As one Key Informant explained:

“[...] Due to their trading activities around the river and how they made profit, they ensured people would not break the taboos that governed the use of the BVR. Arhhhh [local

exaggeration] during their period of operation, who were you to carry a dark pot to pass by to fetch water from the river? Since their shops were on the route to the river, they monitored the activities so well. [...] People did not want their ‘troubles’ so they would comply with their funds mobilisation during the various sanctifications” (K11 4, fieldwork 2023).

Various accounts revealed that the WoC started as a collective of traders and elderly Mo women but soon extended its mandate into judicial functions, resolving disputes among both natives and non-natives. Being “sent to the WoC” was something residents actively avoided as the women were reputed to be unsparing, fair and firm. Their sanctions ranged from monetary fines to forms of public disgrace. Whilst these punishments were discretionary, they were respected as legitimate and socially corrective. The WoC did not operate in isolation. It was supported by the Bamboi Council of Elders, who referred cases to the committee for adjudication. In implementing sanctions, the WoC mobilised young men from the various Mo ethnic gates to apply discretionary coercion on uncooperating “culprits”. This cooperation between older women and younger men enriched the committee’s authority and enabled it to manage conflicts that even the palace found difficult to resolve. For individuals that felt mistreated by powerful male elders, the WoC represented an alternative pathway to justice and ‘fair’ judgement. This mode of power is analytically significant. Western feminisms often assume that women in patriarchal African contexts lack influence unless externally “empowered.” The WoC unsettles this imaginary. Its authority emerged internally – from the women’s strategic location along the river, their economic capital, their moral legitimacy, and their capacity for collective organising. As African feminists argue, such forms of power challenge and decentre homogenising and universalist narratives that cast African women as inherently subordinate (Amaefula, 2021; Coetzee, 2017).

The committee defied the village's patrilineal system of inheritance and how that shaped the nature of patriarchy in Bamboi. In another conversation with VR 9, who lived through the WoC's operations, she confirmed their feared authority:

“Hwe, mmaa committee no deɛ, na nnye asem ketewa oo. Na omo ani ɛdeɛn ankasa. Wo mpe sɛ w'asem mpo bɛkɔ wɔn hɔ. Sɛ wo di fɔ a, deɛ wɔn de bɛyɛ wo no, w'ankasa wo mmpɛ mpo [...] sɛ wo yɛ obaa o, barima o, kuro panyin o, ɔmo nfa wo ho. Deɛ nokware no da no, ɔmo di bɛ to”, literally, “See, as for the women's committee, it was not a small matter [oo]. They were strong-willed. You would not want your case to get to them. If you were wrong, what they would do to you, you would not even like it [...] whether you are a woman o, a man o, a village leader o, they did not care about you. They would always stand where the truth was” (VR 9, fieldwork 2023).

However, her account also revealed that the WoC's operated within ethnicised boundaries:

“[...] If you [referring to non-Mo natives] came to stay and work to feed yourself on our land and decide to dishonour or engage in a feud with natives, they will pursue you to go back to where you came from” (VR 9, fieldwork 2023).

This statement exposes the ethnic boundaries embedded in the WoC's operations. Whilst they were widely respected for fairness, their authority was deeply rooted in Mo ethnic identity, raising questions about how justice was extended to non-Mo residents such as the Batoor, Akan, Vagla, Dagaaba, and Gurusi settlers in Bamboi. This nuance underscores what African feminist scholars have argued: African women's agency emerges within intersectional social formations – ethnicity, lineage, age, economic status – not outside them. This remark situates the intersectional analysis on ethnicity in Chapter Five (5.3.7).

Regardless of these exclusions, the WoC assumed responsibilities that would ordinarily be coded as “masculine” within patriarchal structures – exercising judicial authority over both women and men, and enforcing compliance with the rules governing the BVR. Their actions complemented the safeguarding responsibilities of the water priesthood and helped maintain the moral order of the waterscape.

Viewed through the lens of African feminisms (for example, Nkealah, 2016; Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2012; Hudson-Weems, 2004; Steady, 1987), the WoC exemplifies complementarity, collective responsibility, and situated power – principles that contest dominant universalist imaginaries of gender. Their legacy demonstrates that African women do not simply respond to patriarchy; they actively shape, manage, and regulate social and ecological life through locally grounded forms of agency, a principle deeply rooted in African feminist thought (see Chapter 2.5.2, especially in discussions of Stiwanism and Nego-feminism).

The Mo-only composition of the WoC brings to the fore important questions about belonging, legitimacy, and exclusion in local governance. Whilst the committee was widely celebrated for its firmness and moral courage, its location within Mo ethnic identity also created boundaries around who benefitted fully from its justice system. In a multi-ethnic settlement like Bamboi – home to Batoor, Akan, Vagla, Dagaaba, and Gurusi settlers – such exclusion raises critical concerns about the uneven distribution of voice and protection.

Despite these limitations, the WoC’s ability to exercise judicial authority over both men and women, including powerful elders, marks a significant disruption of patriarchal expectations. Their role exemplifies what African feminist scholars describe as relational, situated, and complementary agency – forms of power that do not rely on oppositional confrontation but emerge from responsibility, social embeddedness, and communal accountability. The committee operated

as guardians of Bamboi's moral and ecological order, enforcing taboos and supporting the water priesthood's safeguarding mandate. Through this, they embodied the African feminist emphasis on complementarity, collective wellbeing, and localised forms of authority, thereby contesting universalist Western narratives that frame African women as inherently powerless or in need of external "empowerment". Instead, the WoC demonstrates FPE in practice, where gendered power is enacted through everyday governance of natural resources, ritual obligations, economic influence, and social sanctioning embedded in Bamboi's lived realities.

Whilst the WoC's influence was rooted in strong-willed assertion, open confrontation, and visible leadership, not all expressions of power in Bamboi are articulated through overt action. Alongside these bold forms of female organising exists another, quieter mode of regulating social and water-related conduct – one grounded in silence, subtle resistance, and strategic non-engagement. It is to these quieter, yet equally consequential, dynamics of authority and resistance that the next section now turns. Section 7.5 examines how silence and silencing function as tools of power, control, and social regulation within Bamboi's water governance landscape.

7.5 Silencing and silence: a tool for shaming and maintaining dignity and assertiveness

Silence in Bamboi occupies an ambiguous and multi-layered space that resists the binary interpretive gaze often found in dominant Western feminist analyses. Whilst Eurocentric and mainstream feminist traditions frequently read silence as a manifestation of patriarchal oppression – particularly the silencing of women – African feminist scholarship urges a more nuanced reading. For example, Adimora-Ezeigbo (2012) and Nnaemeka's (2004) conceptualise silence, measured speech, and strategic withdrawal not as submission, but as purposeful tools of negotiation,

relationality, and social navigation in patriarchal contexts. Silence, in this framing, can be a mode of agency, a strategic performance, and a relational ethic rather than a symbol of powerlessness.

Bamboi complicates both frames. Here, silence is neither exclusively a gendered constraint nor purely a tool of quiet resistance. Instead, it functions as a socially enforced communicative discipline that affects both males and females. Public speech in Bamboi is regulated through potent social mechanisms of shaming, renaming, and reputational sanctioning. Speaking “too much” or too assertively in public spaces – such as village forums, palace meetings, or village deliberations – risks attracting derogatory nicknames that mark individuals as talkative, disrespectful, or unruly. These renamings reconfigure one’s social identity, sometimes permanently, producing a powerful incentive to self-censor.

The practice of renaming – where a person’s birth name is replaced in everyday use with an adjective that reflects their perceived behavioural “excess” – operates as a disciplinary tool that crosses gender, age, and ethnic boundaries. Consequently, adults in Bamboi carefully manage their verbal presence, ensuring they do not overstep the tacit limits of acceptable public speech. This dynamic significantly shaped the ethnographic process, slowing down interviews and requiring careful trust-building. For instance, in a series of Key Informant Interviews with KII 1, he frequently paused and giggled to seek reassurance:

“[...] can I continue? I hope I am not talking too much” (KII 1, fieldwork 2022/23).

This constant seeking of reassurance revealed the internalised fear of being socially reclassified as a “talker”. The pauses and the constant seeking of validation reminded me of a buzzing name in the village, “Kasafoɔ”, literally, ‘Talker’ (not her real name but nicknamed). She illustrates how renaming can reorder a person’s social identity across their lifetime. As I discussed in Chapters

Three (section 3.5.4) and Five (section 5.3.1), Kasafoɔ, younger sister of Naa Tiyaɔ, was widely known not by her birth name but through this nickname, which signified her expressive, narrative-rich style of communication. Consequently, when I needed to engage older people for their perspectives on the evolving nature of water decision-making in the village, nearly all people who mentioned her name alongside her sister, Naa Tiyaɔ, further advised me against meeting her since *“she was going to overburden me with her windy conversations”*. In an informal conversation with VR 5 he insisted:

“[Eiii] do you have enough time? She talks oo. You will ask her something and she will start from your great grandfather’s history before settling on the simple question you asked” (VR 5, fieldwork 2022).

Whilst in many African societies oral narration is a key mode of epistemological transfer, her expansive storytelling was reinterpreted as excessive within Bamboi’s communicative norms. As VR 5 explained, engaging her meant embarking on long historical detours – a quality that the village framed not as intellectual richness but as social inconvenience. This renaming practice creates subtle boundaries around who speaks, how often, and under what conditions. It also reveals how social order in Bamboi is maintained not only through locally evolved institutions (see Chapter Seven, section 7.4 on the Women’s Committee), but also through everyday communicative regulation. The internalised fear of being labelled discourages many residents from speaking freely, especially in public gatherings.

The renaming of opinionated and expressive people in Bamboi does not end with the stories of KII 1 and Kasafoɔ. In an informal conversation with a middle-aged women and trader in the village, she revealed the following narrative as her reasons for avoiding village forums and commitments:

“As for Bamboi [here], if there is an issue and you comment a lot on it, you will be given a ‘name’ soon. Even if you are from the broader Mo ethnic group but not specifically from Bamboi [here], they [Bamboi natives] will tell you that, you do not hail from Bamboi so shut up” (VR 3, fieldwork 2023).

As VR 3 noted, expressing strong views in public forums can quickly attract a name, or provoke admonitions to “keep quiet,” especially for migrants or Mo individuals who do not originate from Bamboi. These dynamics were particularly visible during a heated village forum regarding the infiltration of non-resident artisanal miners whose actions threatened pollution of the BVR. Whilst the issue held deep collective concern, most adults – both men and women – remained reticent, allowing only a small group of young men to dominate the conversation. However, privately, many residents later articulated strong opinions in one-on-one conversations with me, suggesting that silence in public spaces is not indicative of a lack of concern but a response to the social risks associated with being renamed or judged disrespectful.

In this way, silence in Bamboi operates as a social governance mechanism, shaping participation, authority, and voice in ways that transcend gender. It aligns with broader African feminist critiques of Western universalisms, showing that silence cannot be simply read as evidence of women’s marginalisation. Instead, it reflects a culturally embedded communicative economy in which speech is tightly linked to dignity, self-protection, and moral comportment. Such insights challenge hegemonic gender frameworks that presume universal meanings of voice and silence, echoing African feminist calls (Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 2003), to ground analysis in contextual epistemologies rather than imported conceptual imaginations.

7.6 Conclusion of the chapter

This chapter has demonstrated one of the thesis's original contributions: the deployment of African feminisms as a decolonial analytic lens to interrogate and unsettle the simplicities embedded in Western and Eurocentric feminist framings of gender, particularly their universalising gaze on "women." Such hegemonic gazes continue to shape gender mainstreaming policies and practices globally (Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 2003; 1997; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Amadiume, 1987). Through the interwoven insights of African feminisms and FPE, the chapter has responded to research question four by showing that even within a small, deeply patriarchal setting such as Bamboi, gender relations are neither homogenous nor uniformly experienced.

The first argument emerging from this chapter shows that women in Bamboi do not constitute a singular category in relation to water decision-making. The process of selecting the Koora Yaa Kumah – the water/river priestess – from among Mo women of the Koorafon gate illustrates how intersectional characteristics such as kinship, gate membership, lineage, seniority, ritual legitimacy, and social reputation structure access to authority in ways that mainstream gender frameworks fail to anticipate. The privileges associated with the priestesshood – access to rituals, decision spaces, and cosmological authority – are not extended to all Mo women, nor even to all women within the Koorafon. This variation underscores African feminist critiques of universalised gender mainstreaming: gender cannot be operationalised as a uniform or additive category, because power is always entangled with localised intersectional identities and ascriptive structures.

The second argument challenges Western-centric portrayals of African women as inherently weak, oppressed, passive, or lacking agency. Evidence from the ethnography demonstrates the opposite: Bamboi's women – particularly those who comprised the historically significant Women's Committee – exhibited strong adjudicatory authority, organisational capacity, economic

independence through river-side trading, and considerable moral legitimacy. Their practices exemplified African feminist notions of complementarity, where women's authority is grounded not in oppositional politics but in socially valued roles that sustain community life (Dery, 2024; Nnaemeka, 2004; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994). The formation and operation of the WoC stand as powerful counterpoints to Western narratives of African women's disempowerment. Their ability to adjudicate conflicts, enforce taboos around the BVR, and sanction offenders – including men and elites – demonstrate the existence of non-formal, culturally embedded modes of female authority that dominant gender mainstreaming frameworks often overlook.

The third argument interrogates the popularised village narrative that “water issues are female issues” – a phrase that mirrors, and is reinforced by, the gender mainstreaming strategies of NGOs and local government systems in Ghana. The ethnography revealed that such statements are largely performative and buzzy, reflecting scripted expectations linked to SDG-aligned gender discourses rather than actual everyday practices. Whilst domestic water collection is feminised in public narratives, “big decisions” concerning water, such as negotiating royalties from illegal mining activities or lobbying for potable water infrastructure, are driven by actors embedded in specific power networks, most frequently men in leadership positions or mixed-gender committees. Participation in such decisions is shown to be neither strictly gendered nor evenly accessible, but shaped by complex intersectional hierarchies – age, lineage, political influence, economic standing, ritual legitimacy – that may exclude both men and women. This finding challenges the simplistic assumptions underpinning mainstream gender mainstreaming strategies, which treat representation as a numerical exercise rather than an interrogation of power, voice, and influence.

The chapter has shown that the gendered institutions of Bamboi's water governance – particularly the stool of the water/river priestess and the WoC – reveal pathways through which women's

authority emerges outside the formal structures valorised by IWRM and other state-led governance models. These forms of authority are rooted in cosmology, relationality, ritual stewardship, and socio-cultural legitimacy. They stand in stark contrast to IWRM's numeric and technocratic approach to gender inclusion, which equates representation with empowerment. In Bamboi, substantive influence is anchored not in formal quotas but in spiritual authority, gate-based legitimacy, and everyday relational power.

Finally, these arguments reveal how gendered power in Bamboi is constituted through fluid, situated, and intersectional arrangements that cannot be captured by universal gender templates. They reinforce the thesis's broader claim: that decolonising water governance requires reframing gender beyond Western categories, centring instead the ontologies, cosmologies, social hierarchies, and relational practices that shape everyday water decisions.

The next chapter condenses the study's major findings by drawing from the conceptual, methodological, and empirical strands explored in the preceding chapters. It reflects on their theoretical, methodological, and policy implications, and identifies areas for future research in decolonising water governance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

8 Major findings and conclusion

8.0 Introduction

This chapter has brought together the central arguments and empirical insights of the thesis to reassess the assumptions underpinning gender mainstreaming in water governance in Ghana. Throughout the thesis, I have demonstrated that the theorisation and practice of gender equality – particularly as institutionalised through the SDGs and IWRM – are shaped by Western and Eurocentric feminist histories and imaginaries. These hegemonic framings prioritise “women’s inclusion” as a universal marker of gender equality. However, they remain analytically thin, as they fail to engage with the multiple and intersecting factors that structure power, authority, and participation in everyday life.

As discussed in Chapter One, the challenge lies in the fact that gender mainstreaming, as shaped by Western Eurocentrism, forms the basis upon which the UN articulates its global commitments to gender equality through the SDGs:

“[...] Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets [...]. The systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda is crucial” (UN, 2015, p.6).

Whilst these commitments appear progressive, their operationalisation through national development frameworks in Ghana – embedded within the decentralised system of governance – has produced a narrow focus on “gender-as-woman”, often measured through representational quotas in formal committees. This thesis has shown that such oversimplification obscures the

dense and relational dynamics through which inclusion and exclusion are negotiated in Bamboi's water decision-making spaces. Intersectional factors including age, marital status, social and economic status, migration history, ethnicity, spiritual legitimacy, and social perception were empirically demonstrated to be as significant as gender – and often more decisive – in shaping voice, authority, and access within water governance.

The thesis problematises this form of gender mainstreaming from a decolonial standpoint, drawing on intersectional insights grounded in African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism. In doing so, it unpacks the gendered simplifications that underpin mainstreaming practices within Ghana's water governance framework. Key issues within these theoretical approaches, including intersectionality and decoloniality, were foundational to the study. Chapter One introduced these concepts, whilst Chapter Two deepened their conceptual and theoretical elaboration. Collectively, they framed the following two overarching problems.

First, gender challenges are not homogenous across contexts. Rather, they are shaped by complex and intersecting social features that position women and men differently within specific settings. The social constructions and expectations associated with sex – such as being male or female – are not mutually exclusive from other intersecting categories, including age, physical appearance, marital status, educational attainment, economic position, and ethnic affiliation, in determining how individuals relate to one another in society. I have argued that gender inequality therefore requires critical deconstruction to challenge the persistent assumption that all men possess decision-making power whilst all women are universally excluded. This foundational assumption is empirically untenable, even within racially homogenous contexts. Chapters Two, Six, and Seven demonstrate that gender is deeply entangled with other social markers and cannot be meaningfully understood through binary framings of male privilege and female disadvantage alone. Indeed,

when global gender norms rooted in Western feminist histories are transposed onto Bamboi, they often generate a performative sense of inclusion – most visibly through formalised “development committees” that rarely function as genuine sites of decision-making authority (Kolipaka et al., 2026; Cleaver and Hamada, 2010).

Second, African feminist and intersectional scholarship demonstrates that gendered inequalities affect women and men differently, but not exclusively or uniformly. As illustrated in Chapter Six, even highly gendered customary roles such as the River Priest and Priestess exclude the majority of both women and men. Eligibility for these roles is shaped less by gender alone than by lineage, seniority, marital legitimacy, personality, and spiritual authority. Whilst patriarchy undeniably structures everyday life in many African contexts, this thesis contends that dominant global models of gender mainstreaming remain analytically inadequate and require substantial rethinking if they are to meaningfully address context-specific power relations.

To unpack this complexity, the study was guided by the following overarching question: What prospects and possibilities do African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism offer for decolonising water governance? To operationalise this, four sub research questions were posed:

1. What are the dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how do they manifest in Bamboi?
2. Who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi?
3. How do local and customary institutions interact with formal water governance institutions?
4. How are local and customary institutions gendered?

The thesis responds to these questions by reimagining gender mainstreaming within Ghana's waterscape. To provide an empirical depth on how this hegemony has created complexities in local contexts, the study adopted (decolonial feminist) ethnography to dive into the everyday water decision making at Bamboi, a village in northern Ghana. Chapter Three detailed the design, rationale, and methodological conduits of this approach.

Chapter Four began analysing the empirical data and it was dedicated to responding to the first research question. Drawing on both literature and empirical data, the chapter unpacked the complex and political nature of water governance in Ghana. It demonstrated that colonial and post-independence governance transitions shifted water control from local rights-holders to an emerging elite state apparatus. This transition weakened local safeguarding arrangements and undermined water-related livelihoods, particularly for settlements located around surface water bodies across Ghana.

Chapter Five addressed the second research question by drawing on intersectionality, as conceptualised within African feminisms and FPE, to uncover how inclusion and exclusion in water-related decision-making are produced and sustained within local governance structures. The chapter unpacked the intersecting social markers shaping authority and participation in Bamboi, including age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, religion, economic position, and others, revealing how these intersections shape power beyond gender alone.

Chapter Six drew on the concepts of institutional (water) bricolage and (epistemological) cultural relativism to address the third research question. It examined the narratives, worldviews, stories, myths, and mythology that govern both the physical and non-physical (or supernatural) safeguarding and "protection" of water resources in Bamboi. The chapter revealed that although these safeguarding practices historically served as mechanisms for protecting water resources

against harmful anthropogenic activities, they have been progressively undermined by shifting dynamics of water control between local communities and the Government of Ghana. The chapter concluded by showing that the interaction between local institutions and state-led water governance systems produces a form of institutional bricolage. This bricolage, the chapter argues, could potentially be harnessed to mitigate the capacity limitations associated with the Government of Ghana's (in) ability to govern water resources under conditions of natural and human-induced scarcity.

Chapter Seven uncovered the deeper narratives that shape the everyday expressions of African feminisms and the history of women's collective organising in Bamboi. This was exemplified through the organic emergence of the Women's Committee, which began among a small group of Mo women without external "empowerment" initiatives or formal traditional mandates, as would characterise institutions such as the council of elders or the Bamboi hankoora. Over time, the WoC became vibrant, operating as an adjudicatory arm of the Bamboi Palace before becoming defunct following the death of its pioneers and a poorly managed leadership transition. This chapter demonstrated that the evolution of the WoC challenges, deconstructs, and unsettles dominant Western gender frames, as well as prevailing narratives that portray African women as inherently weak or passive within theory and practice.

This final chapter synthesises the major findings of the research, drawing together insights from the four analytical chapters. It concludes by identifying directions for future research in FPE, African feminisms, and water governance. Figure 51 provides a visual summary of the key research questions and empirical findings.

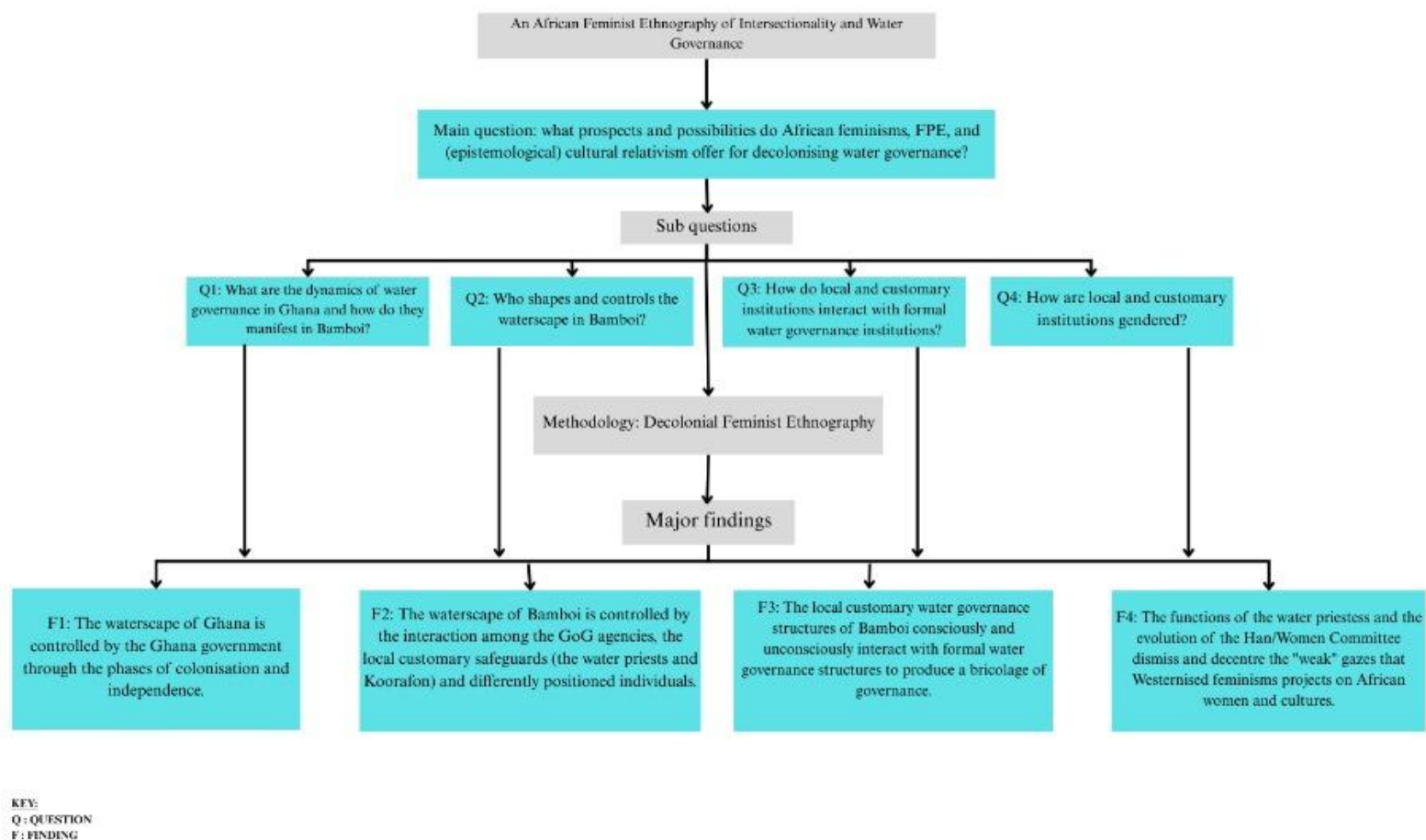


Figure 51: Pictorial summary of the thesis

Source: Author's construct.

8.1 Major research findings

This section entails the carefully drawn main arguments from the four analytical chapters (Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven), which constitute the first, second, third, and fourth research questions, respectively. Across Chapters Four to Seven, the thesis has shown that Bamboi's waterscape is governed through multiple, layered, intersecting, and often competing institutional arrangements, authority, legitimacy, and worldview. These findings challenge mainstream assumptions in water governance by demonstrating that: the dynamics of water governance are historically shaped and politically mediated; the actors who shape and control water decisions do so through multiple intersectional advantages and constraints; local and customary institutions engage formal governance through negotiated bricolage rather than through formal integration; and gendered configurations of local power dynamics resist universalist portrayals of women as passive, homogenous, or powerless. These themes are carefully unpacked in 8.1.1 to 8.1.4.

8.1.1 The dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how they manifest in Bamboi

Chapter Four addresses Research Question One by examining the dynamics of water governance in Ghana and how these dynamics manifest in Bamboi, situating the analysis within the complex historical and political waterscape of the country. The chapter demonstrates that water governance in Ghana has been shaped by successive shifts in authority – from autochthonous Mo custodianship, led by the Mokooro (Water Priest) and the Koora Hankoora (Water Priestess) of the Koorafon, to colonial administrative control, and later to the post-independence Ghanaian state. Through the processes of colonisation and independence, water was repositioned from a locally governed socio-spiritual entity to a nationally administered economic resource. This transformation is exemplified by the role of the BVR in supporting the national electricity grid through the 400 MW Bui Dam.

As a consequence of these shifts, Bamboi's longstanding reliance on the river for fishing, farming, drinking, and transportation has been significantly disrupted. Contemporary technocratic governance structures and large-scale infrastructure projects frequently exclude the village from decision-making processes or fail to communicate effectively with residents. For instance, flood discharge practices by the Bui Power Authority render fishing – a key livelihood activity in Bamboi – a “death trap” during certain periods, exposing villagers to heightened risk and uncertainty.

The chapter further reveals persistent structural inequalities in water infrastructure provision across Ghana. Water access is shaped by geographical and political prioritisation, which consistently privileges southern Ghana over northern settlements such as Bamboi. As a result, residents are caught between continued dependence on the spiritual authority of the BVR as a source of livelihood security and the unreliable capacity of the state to provide safe and potable water. Although SDG 6 acknowledges limitations in state capacity, policy frameworks frequently foreground gender mainstreaming in ways that obscure these broader governance failures, positioning gender equality as a primary indicator of progress while leaving underlying issues of political marginalisation and infrastructural neglect insufficiently addressed.

8.1.2 Actors and categories that shape and control Bamboi's waterscape

In responding to research question two, concerning who shapes and controls the waterscape in Bamboi, I drew on the arguments of intersectionality as embedded within African feminisms and FPE to illuminate the actors and power relations that structure water governance in the village. This chapter offered a narrower examination of the specific intersections that define access to water-related decision-making. To do this, I deconstructed categories such as sex and gender, age, family ties, the fluidity of migration status, education, marital status, and political affiliations to

ascribe deeper meaning to how multiple intersectional positions operate both within same-sex categories and across different sex categories. This deconstruction foregrounds the discursive complexities that problematically underpin the universalisation of gendered perspectives and gender mainstreaming, even within a local and racially homogeneous setting such as Bamboi. By extension, this analysis affirms African feminisms' critiques of mainstream feminism's universalisation of gender mainstreaming and its implicit portrayal of men as universally powerful.

This chapter begins by identifying two primary spaces of water decision-making in Bamboi: water service provision and water safeguarding. I revealed that while water service provision is shaped by the supply of modern water infrastructure by the central government, individuals, NGOs, and parastatal agencies, the domain of water safeguarding is largely locally driven and led by the Mokooro of the Koorafon, who "protects" the BVR against physical and non-physical/supernatural infractions. I further revealed that whereas water service provision is embedded within modernist paradigms of the central government's development strategy, locally driven water safeguarding practices are shaped by the cosmological worldview of the local people. This cosmic worldview fundamentally structures how interactions between water resources and local communities are understood and enacted.

Within these two governance systems are embedded differentiated experiences among people – both male and female – based on their intersecting socio-demographic characteristics. Bamboi reveals the specificity of these intersectional experiences. I demonstrated that these characteristics interact to produce varying experiences of inclusion and exclusion in broader village decision-making processes, particularly those related to water. As intersectional scholars have shown, intersectional interplay and lived experiences are inherently complex (Misra et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2022; Ifejika Speranza and Bikketi, 2017; Mandel and Semyonov, 2016; McCall, 2005; Collins,

1998; Crenshaw, 1989). Accordingly, grounding research in intersectionality requires explicit recognition of this complexity through the unpacking of multiple and overlapping interactions that generate differentiated outcomes for differently positioned individuals. Consequently, this chapter engages intersectionality through a deeper intra- and inter-categorical analytical approach (see McCall, 2005) to move beyond the simplifications often associated with intersectionality-informed research. For example, I illustrated how categories such as age, gender, and other socio-economic markers may operate independently or interact with other categories to facilitate exclusion or inclusion among people from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

In agreement with intersectional scholars such as Misra et al. (2024), Wyatt et al. (2022), Mandel and Semyonov (2016), McCall (2005), Collins (1998), and Crenshaw (1989), this chapter reveals that gender – understood as the socially constructed expectations of maleness and femaleness – is not the sole axis of power or powerlessness shaping experiences of inclusion and exclusion in decision-making or differential access to the benefits derived from water resources.

8.1.3 The interactions between local/customary and formal water governance institutions

In responding to research question three, concerning how local and customary institutions interact with formal water governance institutions, Chapter Six demonstrates that water governance in Bamboi is characterised by institutional bricolage – the negotiated coexistence of customary and formal governance systems. Water governance in Bamboi operates through the simultaneous presence of cosmological institutions – including the water priesthood, rituals, taboos, myths, and worldviews – and formal institutions such as the District Assembly, the BPA, the WRC, and national ministries.

The chapter unveiled the long-standing and highly structured water/river priesthood that underpins local water governance in Bamboi. I revealed that deeply embedded cultural and cosmological worldviews surrounding water are widespread across Ghanaian societies, predating both colonial administration and the emergent postcolonial Ghanaian state. Although this localised governance system has been weakened by the complexities accompanying the influx of modernised water governance regimes shaped by the Government of Ghana, it continues to command reverence among Bamboi residents who regularly interact with surface water resources. Shaped by this local worldview, the BVR is idolised as Nnaa Moo, with a physical deity located on the western bank of the river. This sacred site has become integral to the everyday life of the village, symbolising accountability and stewardship in the protection of water resources, grounded in the belief that such safeguarding actions yield reciprocal benefits whilst negligence results in calamity.

Conversely, I revealed that the local government authority – the Bole District Assembly – lacks the human, technical, and financial capacity to effectively manage water resources or provide potable water to the towns and villages under its jurisdiction, including Bamboi. This institutional weakness reinforces villagers' worldview that their local economy and access to water are directly linked to their stewardship of the BVR. Such stewardship is expressed through both physical and non-physical safeguarding responsibilities. This finding situates the growing scholarly interest in the intrinsic and supernatural embodiments of water resources (Strang, 2023).

The implication of the villagers' belief in reciprocal relationships with the river is that it may serve as a mechanism for reshaping anthropogenic behaviours that undermine ecological sustainability in Bamboi and other contexts where human–nature relations are mediated through beliefs in supernatural reciprocity. Furthermore, the mismatch between the formal assumptions embedded in SDG 6 and IWRM, and the localised governance practices observed in Bamboi, demonstrates

that IWRM planning processes remain highly technocratic and institutionally formalised (Biswas et al., 2023; GWP, 2022), while local governance practices continue to rely heavily on informal and negotiated pathways (Kosoe et al., 2025; Angmor et al., 2024).

The chapter further drew on the framing of institutional bricolage (Merrey and Cook, 2012; Cleaver, 2002; 2001) to unpack how localised cosmological worldviews on water governance deliberately interact with formal systems spearheaded by the Government of Ghana. This analysis revealed that although state-led water resource management strategies are rooted in modernist logic and often conflict with the cosmological and supernatural foundations of local water safeguarding in Bamboi, both systems interact in practice to complement water governance in the enclave. One example is the offering of libation led by the Water Priest of the Koorafon or the Land Priest of the Haritinafon prior to the commencement of government-led water or infrastructure projects in Bamboi. Such practices occur because local and customary institutions that safeguard cosmological worldviews on water coexist alongside formal state-led governance paradigms. Whilst formal water governance dominates policy discourse and decision-making, the consistency of village sanctification practices – contrasted with unmet expectations regarding state provision and regulation of water – highlights the need for deliberate institutional bricolage in water governance in Bamboi and other Ghanaian contexts.

Moreover, the chapter revealed that water, particularly surface water in Bamboi, is not perceived as non-living. Rather, aquatic organisms such as amphibians, mammals, and reptiles are understood as extensions of the living nature of the water itself. This perception, particularly in relation to the BVR, contrasts with dominant scientific perspectives rooted in Western and Eurocentric epistemologies (Cohen et al., 2023; Kimmerer, 2012). Increasingly, scholarship has

drawn attention to these deep-rooted non-physical relationships and their potential to reshape practices of surface water exploitation (see Nowak et al., 2024; Strang, 2023; Kramm, 2020).

Beyond these insights, the chapter further revealed how the cosmological and metaphysical meanings ascribed to water resources in Bamboi also embody gendered constructions. Whilst some groups perceive the BVR as an embodiment of femininity, others view it as masculine, and some argue the river is gender-neutral due to its simultaneous expression of masculine and feminine attributes. I revealed that those who perceive the BVR as feminine root their assumptions in the presence of aquatic life forms, which they regard as the “progeny” reproduced by the river – what I conceptualise in this thesis as *water lineage*. Whilst reproduction is biologically associated with female roles, the femininity of the river is also connected to Bamboi’s buoyant local economy, shaped by the presence of the Bamboi Bridge across the BVR. Village gatekeepers perceive this economic vitality as analogous to the provisioning capacity of motherhood; a gendered construction associated with femaleness within the local cultural context.

In contrast, those who characterise the BVR as masculine emphasise its perceived capacity for swift reprimand of users – particularly drivers and passengers transporting deceased persons across the bridge without performing the requisite rites under the guidance of the Mokooro or a representative such as the River Narrator. According to village gatekeepers, such infractions result in vehicle breakdowns or accidents on or near the Bamboi Bridge. For these individuals, such disciplinary authority aligns with culturally constructed expectations of masculinity, reinforcing perceptions of the river’s male character.

Meanwhile, those who regard the BVR as gender-neutral ground their beliefs in the multiplicity of characteristics the river embodies – a synthesis of both masculine and feminine constructions.

These nuanced gendered interpretations and localised cultural discourses surrounding water are frequently overlooked in mainstream scholarship (Dery, 2024).

Whilst these findings underscore the importance of decolonising natural resource research to reveal embodied worldviews that shape human-nature relationships (Smith, 2024; Ekowati et al., 2023; Yanou et al., 2023; Makey, 2022; Mehta, 2016), the gendered ascriptions attributed to the BVR and other water resources in Bamboi also have material implications for patterns of extraction and ecological sustainability. For instance, the provisioning capacity associated with feminine interpretations of the river may encourage unsustainable extraction driven by perceptions of abundance and nurture. Conversely, beliefs in the punitive consequences associated with masculine constructions of the river may serve as a deterrent to overexploitation. The gender-neutral framing of the BVR may, therefore, offer a more balanced ethical framework, potentially mediating between extraction and protection in ways that support sustainable water governance.

8.1.4 How local and customary institutions are gendered

Chapter Seven responded to research question four, which examined how local and customary institutions are gendered, by drawing on FPE and African feminisms through storytelling and historical reflections. In this chapter, I brought decolonial discourse into conversation with popularist simplicities that characterise dominant understandings of water governance in Bamboi. I revealed how local and customary institutions that govern water in the village are gendered and consciously mirror the broader gender relations that structure Bamboi's social organisation. One of the original contributions of this thesis is situated within this response, where I engaged African feminisms as a decolonial scholarly lens to unsettle the simplicities embedded in Westernised feminisms – particularly the tendency to conceptualise “women” as a homogenous and universal category, especially in relation to gender mainstreaming (see Tamale, 2020; Oyewumi, 1997;

Amadiume, 1987). Drawing from African feminisms and FPE, I demonstrated that even within a relatively small patriarchal geographical setting such as Bamboi, females – particularly adult females – are not homogenous. Rather, they are differently positioned based on intersecting characteristics such as kinship, age, and socio-economic status. This finding reinforces African feminisms’ critique that gender mainstreaming cannot be designed or implemented as a universal framework.

Furthermore, I revealed that while dominant narratives on gender in patriarchal contexts often portray females as timid, weak, and disempowered, adult females in Bamboi display varying degrees of assertiveness, strength, and adjudicatory agency. These capacities are organically mobilised by women who share kinship ties, economic interests, or other forms of social affinity to organise collective action when the need arises. For example, I documented how the Women’s Committee of Bamboi – organically formed by a group of adult Mo women – came to occupy a central adjudicatory role within the village. The committee functioned as an alternative space for dispute resolution, with the council of elders, led by the Bamboi Chief, referring certain cases to the group for “justice.” I further revealed that the formation, structure, and functionality of the committee challenge deeply entrenched assumptions that women in patriarchal settings are inherently passive, oppressed, or disempowered and therefore require empowerment primarily through formal representation in water committees. This supports the argument advanced by scholars such as Cleaver and Hamada (2010), who caution that such formalised approaches to empowerment do not necessarily translate into meaningful agency in practice.

The chapter also unpacked popularist assertions circulating within the village regarding gender mainstreaming, particularly the widely held mantra that *water issues are female issues*. In Bamboi, this should imply that all water-related matters are driven and managed by women. However, I

revealed that in everyday practice, such statements function largely as rhetorical expressions rather than empirical realities, since femaleness alone does not qualify individuals to participate in high-level or “big” water-related decisions. I illustrated this through an analysis of decision-making processes surrounding the collection and utilisation of “royalties” received as compensation for anticipated pollution of the BVR by small-scale mining companies between late 2022 and early 2023. Participation in such non-customary water decisions was not strictly gendered but instead shaped by entrenched power dynamics operating through intersectional configurations of authority, status, and social positioning. These configurations produced outcomes that excluded both men and women, depending on their positionality within the village hierarchy.

The chapter further explored the roles of the Water Priestess, Koora Yaa Kuma, and the now-defunct Han/ Mmaa (Women’s) Committee. I revealed that the functions of Koora Yaa Kuma and the historical evolution of the Han Committee complicate and challenge dominant Western representations of femaleness in African patriarchal contexts, whilst simultaneously complementing the roles of other village actors with culturally ascribed responsibilities, such as the Bamboi Chief and the hankoora. The Han/Mmaa Committee, for instance, developed organically over time rather than being externally “created” in line with formalised or standardised models of committee formation. This empirical finding resonates strongly with African-centred feminist arguments such as those advanced by Dery (2024) and Adimora-Ezeigbo (2012), who contend that men and women often occupy complementary spaces that collectively sustain social cohesion and communal responsibility.

8.2 Policy implications

Whilst this thesis placed specific emphasis on decolonising the simplistic ways in which gender mainstreaming is framed within water governance, its implications extend well beyond this focus

and speak directly to mainstream water governance practice at national and international scales. For instance, the first analytical chapter, which unpacked Ghana's waterscape, revealed profound capacity challenges embedded within the Government of Ghana's water governance architecture. These challenges manifest through chronic financial, managerial, and technical incapacities that constrain the state's ability to equitably supply, regulate, and manage water resources for the country's population. In contrast, over decades and centuries, autochthonous right holders to water resources have developed governance systems that are locally tailored to, and deeply embedded within, specific social, cultural, and cosmological worldviews.

The history of the Water Priesthood and localised water safeguarding practices in Bamboi, discussed in Chapter Six, provides a compelling illustration of how effective managerial designs are necessarily shaped by local dynamics. Whilst these locally grounded water governance systems have increasingly come under criticism – particularly due to the intensification of neoliberal and modernist approaches to water exploitation that drive (illegal) small-scale mining and the pollution of surface water resources – the lessons embedded within these locally tailored governance arrangements remain noteworthy. Rather than dismissing them as outdated or inefficient, this thesis demonstrates that such systems offer important insights into legitimacy, compliance, and sustainable stewardship that are often absent within formal, state-led frameworks.

Given Ghana's alignment with the SDGs, IWRM, and other global goals, a critical question emerges: can uniform water governance structures meaningfully translate into diverse local realities? The findings of this thesis strongly suggest that they cannot. Uniform managerial arrangements frequently promote what Mdee and Harrison (2019) describe as "isomorphic mimicry" – institutional forms that appear functional and compliant on paper yet fail to deliver

substantive outcomes in practice. In such cases, governance success is measured through formal alignment rather than lived effectiveness.

Overall, the case of Bamboi demonstrates that IWRM, with its formal, technocratic framing and emphasis on efficiency, equity, and sustainability operationalised primarily through state structures, cannot on its own account for how water is governed in place. In Bamboi, informal and customary governance systems grounded in cosmological stewardship not only persist but continue to be central to questions of access, legitimacy, enforcement, and compliance. The empirical picture that emerges is therefore one of institutional (water) bricolage, wherein formal and informal systems coexist, interact, and are unevenly integrated. Within this landscape, intersectional positions – such as age, kinship, status, and spiritual authority – better explain patterns of inclusion and exclusion than formal representation or gender quotas alone.

To this end, this thesis recommends greater academic and policy-oriented efforts that: problematise the assumed universality of governance structures and move toward locally tailored institutional arrangements; recognise and meaningfully integrate customary and cosmological governance systems into district and national water governance frameworks; move beyond numeric gender representation toward intersectional and context-specific understandings of power and agency; adapt SDG and IWRM agendas to local realities rather than imposing uniform templates; acknowledge cosmology, ritual stewardship, and ancestral accountability as legitimate forms of environmental governance capable of strengthening sustainability outcomes; and deliberately engage institutional bricolage by creating structured channels through which formal and informal governance actors can negotiate, cooperate, and co-produce water governance practices.

8.3 Study limitation and directions for future research

Despite deliberate efforts to avoid epistemic habits and routinised theoretical gestures (Aldrin-Salskov, 2020; Ahmed, 2013), this thesis was limited in its ability to comprehensively engage African feminist concepts beyond intersectionality, such as motherism, womanism, stiwanism, snail-sense feminism, and nego-feminism. Whilst these frameworks informed the broader intellectual orientation of the study, they were not comprehensively operationalised within the empirical analysis. Future research could address this limitation by deliberately mobilising one or more of these African feminist frameworks in the analysis of natural resource governance contexts, thereby extending their applicability from theory into grounded practice.

Although the thesis contributes to moving African feminisms from abstraction toward empirical engagement, it did not culminate in the development of a consolidated or formalised analytical framework that could guide future decolonial research. Instead, the study drew selectively on African feminist arguments – particularly intersectionality – to unsettle the simplifications embedded in dominant gender mainstreaming approaches within water governance, especially in African contexts. This opens an avenue for further scholarly work that either relies solely on African feminisms or combines them with complementary frameworks to more systematically theorise social, political, and ecological challenges in contemporary African societies.

Intersectional research is, by nature, analytically demanding and methodologically complex (Misra et al., 2024; Wyatt et al., 2022; McCall, 2005). Whilst this study consciously sought to avoid intersectional simplifications, the empirical material revealed multiple intersecting categories – such as age, kinship, status, spirituality, and gender – whose interconnectedness could not be exhaustively explored within the scope of the thesis. Ordinarily, the qualitative research practice of assertively pre-defining a limited set of categories for deeper interrogation might have enabled

a more detailed exploration of how actors participate in and navigate water-related decision-making in Bamboi. However, adhering to decolonial research principles, the study deliberately resisted allowing the researcher's analytical preferences to filter or prioritise lived realities encountered in the field. Future studies may therefore benefit from purposively selecting fewer intersectional categories for deeper analysis, whilst remaining sensitive to local meanings and social fluidity.

Another area left underexplored concerns the fluid gendered perceptions of water bodies, particularly the BVR, which was variously understood as feminine, masculine, or neutral. Whilst this thesis acknowledged the relevance of such perceptions in shaping practices of appropriation and safeguarding, it did not sufficiently interrogate how these gendered connotations actively enable or constrain overexploitation and conservation practices within the village. Given the centrality of cosmology and symbolism in local ecological governance, future research could more deeply examine how gendered imaginaries of water bodies influence extraction, protection, and accountability.

Furthermore, the study highlights the methodological and conceptual risks associated with treating “gender” as a stable or universally intelligible category in fieldwork. In the early stages of the ethnography, gender was commonly interpreted by many participants as han/female, rather than through Bamboi's more relational constructions and expectations of being han/female or ndam/male. This was partly shaped by the saturation of gender discourse in global development narratives and Ghanaian media representations, which circulate simplified meanings of gender. As a result, “gender” itself risks becoming a site of popularist reduction. Future research should therefore prioritise the localisation and contextualisation of gender as an analytical concept, grounding it firmly in local epistemologies and everyday practices to avoid conceptual slippage

and misdirection. Oyewumi (1997) usefully demonstrates how attending to local constructions of gender is central to decolonising Westernised accounts of African gender identities, which are not fixed or bodily determined but fluid and performative.

In conclusion, these limitations do not undermine the thesis's core contributions but rather signal productive pathways for extending decolonial water governance research.

8.4 Concluding remarks

The intellectual journey undertaken in this thesis – from conceptual framing through the ethnographic engagement to empirical analysis – fundamentally challenged and reshaped my understanding of gender in non-Western contexts such as Ghana. Grounded in the specificity of my lived experience (Makey, 2022), particularly as a scholar who initially advocated for gender mainstreaming through dominant Western feminist logics, this research compelled a critical re-examination of how such frameworks obscure the complex, intersecting forces shaping women's and men's lived realities in places like Bamboi. Whilst representational justice for nearly half of the world's population remains a critical political and ethical concern (Zwarteveen and Boelens, 2017), this thesis has demonstrated that representation alone is insufficient for capturing the relational, intersectional, and context-dependent nature of power.

In Bamboi, authority, voice, and participation are produced not solely along gendered lines, but through dense intersections of age, lineage, marital legitimacy, spirituality, social standing, and historical belonging – configurations that can situate some women above some men, and exclude many people regardless of sex. The village is an evidence that the dominance of gender mainstreaming – as articulated within Western and Eurocentric feminist traditions – flattens the

multiple axes of power that animate decision-making practices, rendering gender legible primarily as a numeric or categorical variable rather than a relational social process.

It was through sustained ethnographic engagement that this thesis came to recognise the richness, coherence, and internal logic of the customary and localised water governance system embedded within Mo cosmology. Without anchoring this research in decolonial frameworks – particularly African feminisms – it would not have been possible to apprehend these governance arrangements as anything other than residual or informal. Instead, they emerged as dynamic, historically rooted systems of stewardship with the capacity to complement and potentially strengthen formal water governance institutions, including the BPA and other stakeholders within the Volta Basin, in addressing unsustainable anthropogenic extraction and escalating water insecurity.

The study has further demonstrated that African feminisms are neither peripheral nor supplementary but constitute robust analytical traditions for understanding governance, power, inequality, agency, and environmentally produced scarcities in African contexts. Concepts such as motherism, womanism, intersectionality, snail-sense feminism, nego-feminism, and stiwanism offer nuanced decolonial lenses that disrupt universalised policy prescriptions and foreground relational, negotiated, and context-specific understandings of gender and governance. They collectively challenge the epistemic authority of global frameworks that privilege standardisation over place-based knowledge.

This thesis therefore concludes that decolonising water governance is not simply a technical or institutional exercise, but an epistemological and political project – one that centres African feminist thought, recognising local cosmologies and lived practices as legitimate sources of governance knowledge, and unsettling the presumed universality of global agendas such as the

SDGs and IWRM. It is within this synthesis of theory, cosmology, and everyday practice that more just, legitimate, and sustainable forms of water governance become possible.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Profile of Deg/Mo language in thesis

Deg/Mo	English meaning
Adre	Also used to describe the BVR in Bamboi.
Anni	Water
“...fon”	Family/gate
Han	Female
Hankoora	Queenmother. It is used to describe the Queenmother of Bamboi and the female gate heads of the various gates that attend the palace council meeting.
Nnaa Moo	The native/cosmic name of the BVR.
Naa	Genderless description of an aged or person in authority. It is similar to the Nnaa used to describe the BVR. This reveals the localised personhood of the river.
Ndam	Male
Nsuowura (Akan)	Owner (steward) of water. This is usually used to describe the Mokooro.
Korowii	(Almighty/Supreme) God.
The six Deg/Mo gates in Bamboi	
Gate	Rights in Bamboi
Yaarafon	Paramount Chieftaincy right
Haritinafon	Land title holders
Koorafon	River/Water Priesthood titleship
Vongboi	Led conflict resolutions/intercessions
Suurafon	Pseudo linguists of Bamboi palace
Jaagafon	Residents of Bampewa village

Appendix B

Interview guide

Participant's information
Gender:
Position/Role:
Contact details:
Date of interview:

Target participants 1: Traditional rulers
1. How do you get water in Bamboi? 2. What are your experiences with getting water for your daily activities in this village? 3. Who takes decision on water in Bamboi? 4. What are the roles and expectations of those who takes decision on water access? 5. What informs decision making on water? 6. How has water decision making changed over time? 7. How does water decision changes along the different seasons in the year?
Target participants 2: Government Agencies – District level
1. What informs decision making regarding water provision in the district, particularly Bamboi? 2. How does water decision changes along the different seasons in the year? 3. What framework(s) guide water governance in the district, particularly Bamboi? 4. How are the frameworks relevant and appropriate for water access, control and management? 5. How do you engage local communities in framing the decisions regarding water access, control and management? 6. What are the general reflections on water access, control and management in the District/ village? 7. Who participate in decisions regarding water? 8. What is the relationship between government policies and water provision, access and control at Bamboi? 9. How has water decision-making changed over time?

Target participants 3: Government agencies – Bamboi
1. What are the processes of water decision making at your level? 2. What informs the decision making on water? 3. Who are involved in the processes? 4. What are the challenges experienced in the governance of water at your level? 5. What are the areas/levels in which community participation is required or starts? 6. What are your reflections on community actors' characteristics such as gender, age, sex, etc. in terms of participating in decision making regarding water? 7. How has water decision making changed over time? 8. How does water decision changes along the different seasons in the year?

Appendix C

Observation guide

Name of issue	Location	Remarks (in my field notebook)
Physical environment observation		
Transect/recognisance walk of the village		
Surface water sources (especially the BVR)		
Water sources		
Other issues		
Meeting observation		
Water committee meetings		
Village forums		
Other water related gatherings		
Other village gatherings		
Participant observation		
Festivals		
Water sanctification rituals		
Random issues of interest		
Observing and participating in the everyday village's life		

Appendix D

List of planned Key Informant Interviews (15/01/2023)

S/N	CATEGORY	TARGETTED PARTICIPANTS	INTERVIEW WED (YES /NO)	REMARKS
1	VILLAGE LEADERS	The Chief's representative, Bamboi	YES	Future follow ups
2		Queen mother, Bamboi	YES	Future follow ups
3		'Yaarafon' Queen mother	YES	Future follow ups
4		'Koorafon' Council head	YES	Future follow ups
5		'Naa Tiya'	YES	Future follow ups
6		Water Priests	YES	Future follow ups
7		Narrator of 'Nnaa Moo'	YES	Future follow ups
8		Assemblyman, Bamboi	YES	Future follow ups
9		Water committee members	YES/NO	Future follow ups
10		Concerned youth president	NO	Scheduled
11		Heads of non-Mo ethnicities	YES/NO	Uncompleted
11	GOVERNMENT (DISTRICT) AGENCIES	Assistant Engineer, Bole District	YES	Future follow ups
12		Former Assistant Engineer, Bole District	NO	Scheduled
13		District Planner, Bole District	NO	Scheduled
14		Community Liaison Officer BPA	NO	Contacted but not scheduled
15		Assemblyman (New Longoro A)	YES	Future follow ups

17	OTHER INFORMANTS	Assemblywoman (New Longoro A)	YES	Future follow ups
18		Community Water and Sanitation Agency (CWSA) Manager	YES	Future follow ups
19		CWSA Accountant	YES	Future follow ups
20		CWSA Community Relations Officer (CRO)	NO	Contacted but not scheduled

Appendix E

Field gaps report

Reflective gaps report during the mid-fieldwork

S/N	Exploratory research Questions	Main issues from responses	Gaps for further clarity
1	How does applying African feminisms, FPE, and (epistemological) cultural relativism expand the understanding of the dynamics surrounding women's participation in water governance? (theoretical question)	Life histories from Naa Tiya and her sister, 'Kasafɔɔ' give practical reflection on understanding African feminism theories. For instance, they enable understanding on <i>motherism</i> and <i>womanism</i>. Womanism in the sense that Naa Tiya's transformation into a 'full' woman to take up responsibilities of her ancestors (grandmothers) who served as 'priests' by cooking to sanctify the deity mirror Alice Walker's female teenager's metaphor in 'The Color Purple'. FPE in the fieldwork emanates from the multiple stories, subjective and intersectional experiences in water and general decision making in Bamboi (based on age, ethnicity, sex, religion, family ties, marital status, economic capacity, etc.).	More life histories for varied reflections beyond Naa Tiya and her sister. Maybe, stories of economically powerful features that negotiate water decisions and general decisions making in line with their thoughts. More subjectivities and intersections on participation. Triangulate stories with counter stories, if available.

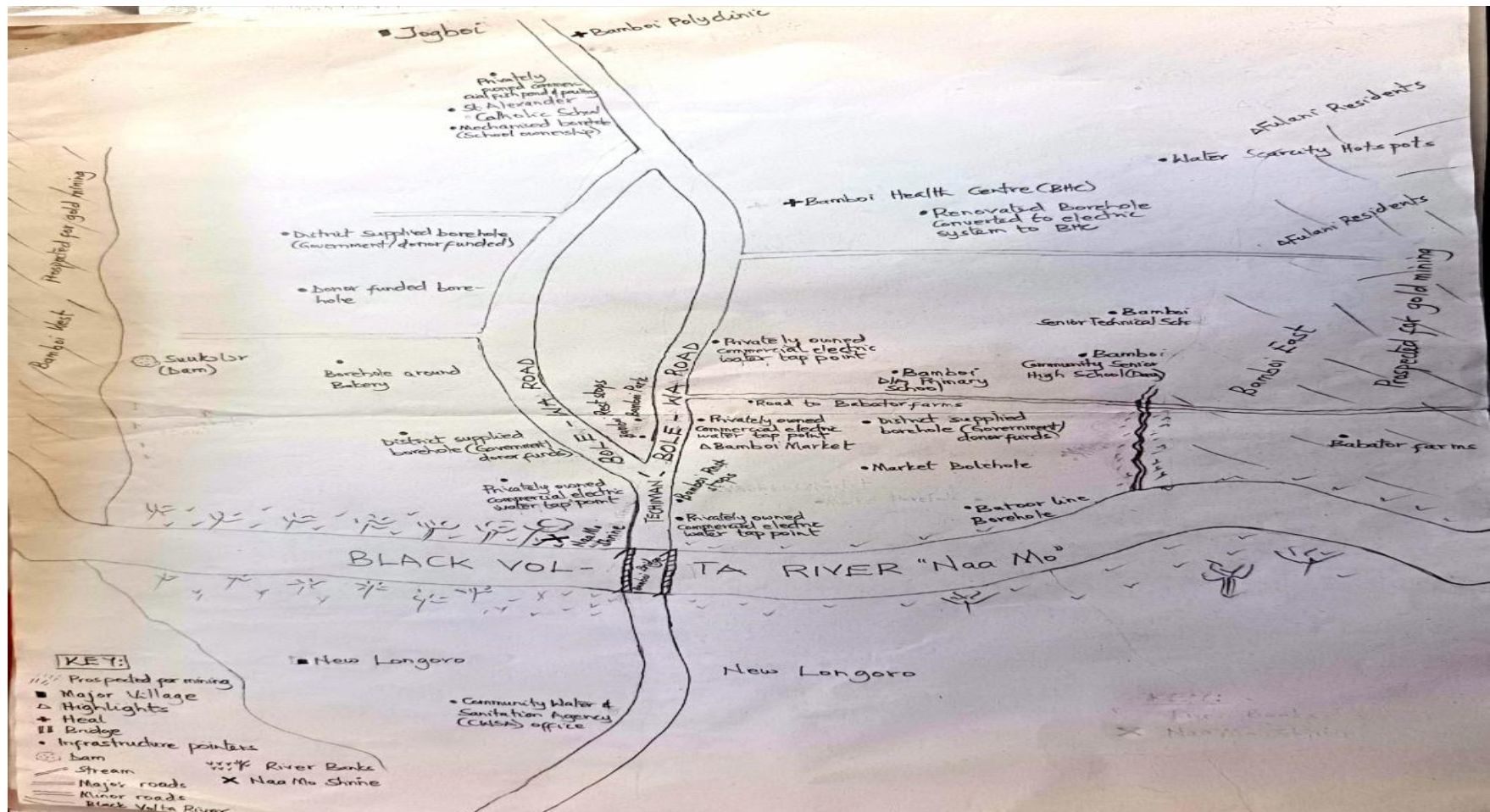
		As well Koora Gate's oral history on how colonisation impacted the delineation of boundaries along rivers to establish South Mo and North Mo at different administrative and geographical suffice reflections on decolonisation and resource governance. I must add that the whole operation of spirituality around sanctifying the BVR is something unrecognised in the 'Scientific' governance of water bodies. In-depth in the spirituality of the governance of the BVR lies a critical reflection on the conduits in IWRM 'can' make room for coordinated efforts of 'scientific' and 'spiritual' water governance arrangements. Although I have encountered stories that do not necessarily follow the dominant scientific paths of water governance, interviews from respondents do not connect the reflections on (epistemological) cultural relativism so far.	Deeper questioning to understand the substance or otherwise of (epistemological) cultural relativism in this thesis.
2	What are the multiple narratives on women's participation and experiences of	Aside the above points (in 1) enhancing theoretical reflections on African feminisms and FPE and how these aid understanding of the women and water governance literature, they present stories and multiple experiences on women participation.	Speak with females in formal water governance roles. Listen to more narratives of various people, both males and

	women in both formal and informal water governance in Northern Ghana?	That aside, there are various sets of women that have been engaged in this ethnography. One of the groups are females in decision making authority such as the queenmother of Bamboi, and some <i>Obaapanyins</i> (female heads) of some four gates in Bamboi. As well, I have engaged ‘ordinary’ community members who are both young and old. All these people have different experiences on water related issues. These narratives suffice this question. I must state that most of the narratives are coming from females in non-formal water governance roles. It is quite difficult sampling females in formal water governance roles, such as the CWSA and GWCL and the BPA, as these roles are mainly public service roles and highly male dominated, except I review my scope to purposively speak to females in formal roles wherever I may locate one. Regardless, the WATSAN in its nature is formal and a decentralised role. Speaking with WATSAN committee	females to have a deeper understanding of the gendered experiences.

		members serve the purpose but I need deeper reflection on the policy level experiences.	
3	How is participation in formal and informal water governance informed by the dynamics of actors, intersections and socio-cultural systems?	The fieldwork so far has reviewed there are a lot of criteria that determine who participates in water decision making. For instance, it was established in New Longoro that one must stay closer and depend on a particular source of water they are going to oversee. In Bamboi, to take active roles in the governance of the main source of water and livelihood in the village (BVR), one must be affiliated to the Koora Gate on patrilineal connection. As well, several other factors have been revealed to substantiate this point. The formal roles (except the WATSAN) are public servant roles and strictly go through a formalised recruitment process.	The data gathered in this category so far is the starting point to using oral histories to triangulate the factors revealed from interviews at this question. I am open to more stories at this category.

Appendix F

Participatory map of Bamboi



Appendix G

Letter of invitation to research data validation forum

C/o Vivian Nsiah,
University of Leeds,
LS 2 9JT,
Leeds - United Kingdom.
19th April 2023.

To whom it may concern

Bamboi,
Bole District,
Savannah Region – Ghana.

Dear Naa/Nana/Honourable/Mr/Mrs/Miss/Sir/Madam/Ing,

Invitation to Research Data Validation Forum

I would be very grateful if you could honour this invitation to attend a data validation forum at the Multipurpose Community Centre, Bamboi, on Friday 5th May 2023 from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm.

As my research comes to an end in May 2023, this invitation is towards getting your contributions in validating the data I have collected in Bamboi since 2022, regarding the ‘Intersections of Gender and Water Governance’. The validation is to ensure that the information I have gathered through observation, conversations and interviews reflect your realities.

I hope my invitation would be honoured, counting on your usual cooperation.

Note: Due to the duration of this forum, water and local drinks will be served.

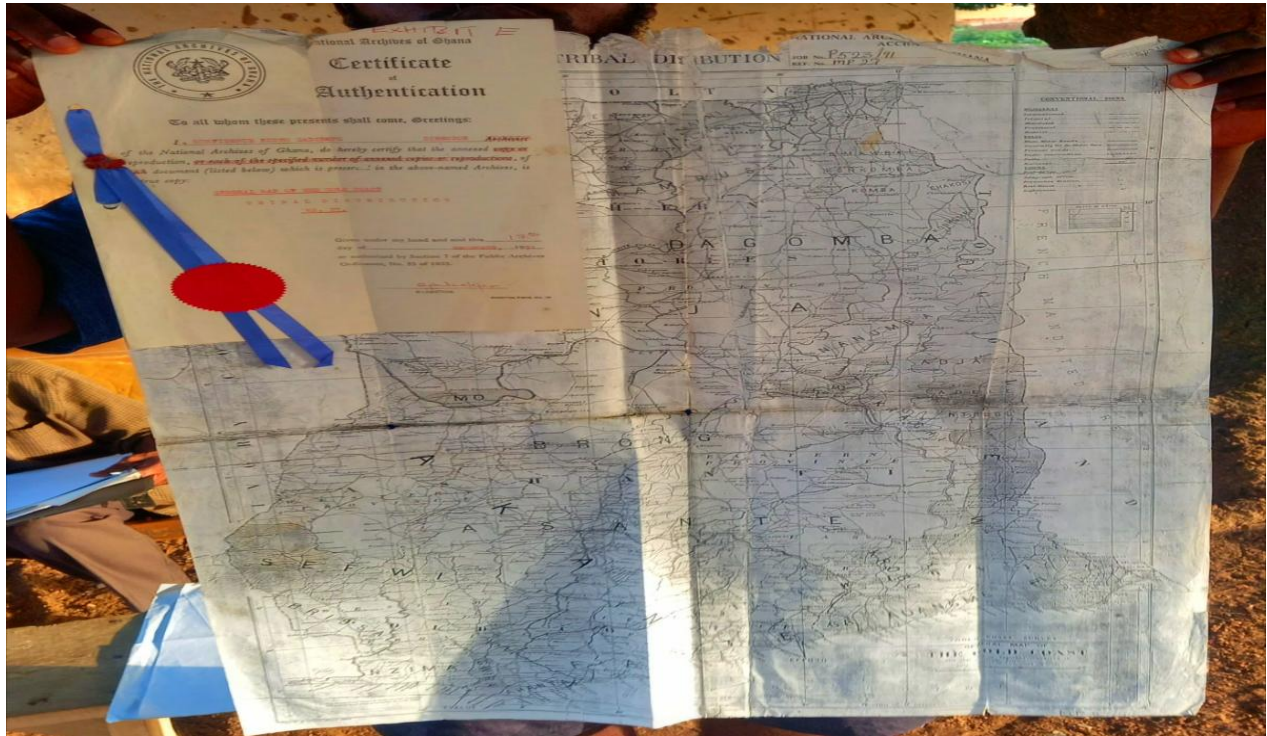
Yours faithfully,

.....

(Vivian Nsiah – 0541671777).

Appendix H

Pictures gallery



An ethnic distribution map of Ghana found in Bamboi's archives.



Pictures with some village gatekeepers.



Informal conversation at a private water vending point while a group of girls and boys fetch water.



Informal conversations with a group of men and a group of women.