

PHENOMENON TRADITIONAL GOLD MINING IN LEBONG TAMBANG VILLAGE, DISTRICT LEBONG

Anggis Aulian^{1a*}, Panji Suminar^{2b}, Diyas Widiyarti^{3c}

^{1,2,3}Program Studi Sosiologi, Fakultas Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik, Universitas Bengkulu, Indonesia

^aE-mail: anggisaulian2004@gmail.com

^bE-mail: psuminar@unib.ac.id

^cE-mail: diyas.widiyarti@unib.ac.id

(*) Corresponding Author

anggisaulian2004@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the phenomenon of traditional gold mining in Lebong Tambang Village, Lebong District. This activity has been prevalent since the Dutch colonial era and remains the primary livelihood for local residents. Unlike previous studies that predominantly focus on economic or environmental aspects, this research highlights the subjective meanings and lived experiences of the community through a phenomenological perspective. This study aims to understand how the community interprets gold mining practices in their daily lives and to identify the factors that drive community involvement in this activity. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with data collection instruments in the form of observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The research involved 12 informants consisting of miners, community leaders, and local residents, with the research scope limited to social and cultural aspects of mining practices in Lebong Tambang Village. The theory used is Alfred Schutz's phenomenological theory, which explains that community involvement in gold mining is influenced by causal motives, past experiences, inherited traditions, and family socioeconomic conditions that shape the view that mining is a natural and inherited occupation. Mining is also driven by the desire to fulfill life's needs (earn income), maintain family economic sustainability, and the community's lifeworld. This activity is considered a routine, social essence, and collective meaning that is naturally accepted in everyday life. The findings imply that policy interventions should consider local values, social structures, and cultural meanings embedded in mining practices to ensure more effective and sustainable community-based management. Thus, mining is not merely an economic activity, but has become part of the social identity and traditions of the Lebong Tambang Village community.

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INTRODUCTION

Gold is one of the most valuable mineral resources and plays a strategic role in the global and national economy, including in Indonesia. Its high economic value makes gold a key commodity in trade and a contributor to foreign exchange earnings. Mining, as an integrated activity that includes exploration, extraction, processing, and distribution of mineral resources, continues to develop in areas with high geological potential. However, in many rural regions such as Lebong Tambang Village, mining activities are still predominantly carried out using traditional methods that are closely tied to local socio-economic conditions.

Lebong Tambang Village is known as one of the areas with significant gold potential, where mining activities have long been the main source of livelihood for the local community. The reliance on traditional gold mining is largely driven by limited employment opportunities, low levels of education, and economic pressures faced by households. As a result, mining is not only seen as a means of survival but also as an accessible occupation that requires relatively low capital and skills. This condition has encouraged the persistence of informal mining practices that continue across generations.

Although traditional gold mining provides direct economic benefits, such as income generation and employment opportunities, it also poses serious environmental and health risks. The use of hazardous substances, including mercury, contributes to water pollution, ecosystem degradation, and long-term environmental damage. In addition, unsafe working conditions increase the risk of occupational accidents and health problems among miners and surrounding communities (Sugasri, 2013). These contradictory conditions highlight the complex dual role of mining as both an economic solution and a source of socio-environmental problems.

Beyond its economic and environmental dimensions, traditional gold mining in Lebong Tambang Village has evolved into a socially embedded practice that shapes community identity and social structures. The existence of informal networks, collective work patterns, and inherited knowledge indicates that mining is not merely an individual economic activity, but also a shared social system. In this context, mining becomes part of the community's "lifeworld," where values, norms, and meanings are continuously constructed and reproduced through everyday practices.

However, previous studies on small-scale and traditional mining have largely emphasized economic contributions and environmental impacts, with relatively limited attention to the subjective meanings and lived experiences of the mining communities. This creates a significant research gap, particularly in understanding how individuals and communities interpret mining activities as part of their daily lives and social reality. Without such understanding, policies and interventions often fail to address the root causes of community dependence on mining.

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining traditional gold mining from a phenomenological perspective, focusing on how the community of Lebong Tambang Village interprets and gives meaning to mining activities. In addition, this study aims to identify the factors that drive community involvement, including economic needs, social influences, cultural traditions, and past experiences. Alfred Schutz's phenomenological theory is employed to analyze human actions based on "because motives" (past-oriented reasons) and "in-order-to motives" (future-oriented goals), which together shape the community's decisions and behaviors.

By providing a deeper understanding of the subjective and social dimensions of traditional mining, this study is expected to contribute not only to academic discourse but also to the development of more context-sensitive, inclusive, and sustainable policies. Such policies should consider local knowledge, social structures, and cultural values in order to reduce environmental risks while maintaining community welfare.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method. According to Bogdan and Taylor (in Abdussamad, 2021), qualitative research is a process that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from individuals, as well as observable behaviors. This study uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach. The descriptive approach is related to providing a comprehensive and in-depth depiction of a problem, symptoms, facts, events, and realities in order to achieve a thorough understanding (Raco, 2010). Descriptive research is used to portray social reality and to obtain broad information regarding the phenomenon of traditional gold mining.

This study involved 10 informants consisting of gold miners, community leaders, and local residents who are directly involved in or affected by mining activities. The selection of informants was conducted using a purposive sampling technique, where participants were chosen based on specific criteria relevant to the research objectives, and was further supported by a snowball sampling approach to identify additional key informants.

Data are essential materials used by researchers to answer research questions, test hypotheses, and achieve research objectives. Therefore, data and data quality are crucial aspects that determine the quality of research outcomes. Data are obtained through a process known as data collection (Silalahi, 2012), which can be conducted using various methods. Each data collection method utilizes specific instruments. In this study, three data collection techniques are employed: observation, interviews, and documentation.

To ensure data validity, this study applies triangulation techniques, including source triangulation (comparing information from different informants), method triangulation (cross-checking data obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation), and time triangulation to enhance data credibility. In addition, ethical considerations were carefully addressed by obtaining informed consent from all informants, ensuring confidentiality of participants' identities, and respecting their voluntary participation throughout the research process.

This study adopts Alfred Schutz's phenomenological approach as a methodological framework because it enables an in-depth understanding of individuals' subjective meanings and lived experiences. Schutz's phenomenology is particularly relevant for analyzing how community members interpret gold mining activities based on their past experiences (because motives) and future-oriented goals (in-order-to motives), which shape their actions and social reality.

Data analysis is a structured process aimed at identifying and organizing information obtained through observation, interviews, and documentation, including field notes and other sources. The purpose of this process is to ensure that the information is easily understood and can be communicated effectively to others. Data analysis involves organizing information, breaking it down into smaller components, synthesizing data, identifying patterns, selecting relevant data for examination, and drawing conclusions. According to Silalahi (in Fadilla & Wulandari, 2023), the analysis process consists of three concurrent flows of activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification, all derived from observations, interviews, and documentation, which will be explained as follows.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

This study involved ten informants, consisting of six key informants who are gold miners, two main informants who are capital owners, and two additional informants from the community who possess important information related to the research problem. In this study, the six key informants provided direct perspectives on the mining phenomenon and the reasons that motivate them to work as miners, while the main informants provided information regarding the overall mining activities. The additional community informants contributed insights that influence the occurrence of the phenomenon in Lebong Tambang Village. These ten informants provided comprehensive information regarding the phenomenon of traditional gold mining in Lebong Tambang Village.

The results of the study indicate that traditional gold mining in Lebong Tambang Village is a long-standing activity that dates back to the Dutch colonial period and has become an integral part of community life. Based on interviews with miners and capital owners, it is known that mining practices are carried out through an informally organized work structure. There is a division of roles among capital owners, field coordinators, pit miners, stone carriers, and gold processors. Working relationships are built on verbal agreements grounded in mutual trust among members of the mining group. Capital owners provide various operational needs, such as excavation tools, water pumps, generators, and timber supports for mining pits. Miners then work inside the pits to extract gold-bearing rocks and transport them to the surface.

Traditional Gold Mining Activities in Lebong Tambang Village

Table 1. Social Structure of Traditional Miners

No	Structure	Main Tasks	Working Relationship
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1	Capital Owner (Pit Owner/Boss)	Provides capital, equipment, and main logistics; manages output and profit-sharing	Distributes profits to all workers
2	Field Coordinator	Manages daily operations; coordinates miners and work schedules	Responsible to the capital owner
3	Pit Miner	Excavates rocks inside mining pits and brings them to the surface	Works under the direction of the coordinator
4	Stone Carrier	Transports rocks from the mining site to processing or collection points	Coordinates with miners and processors
5	Gold Processor (Glundung Operator)	Processes rocks using a <i>glundung</i> machine and mercury to extract gold	Receives materials from miners; processes individually or in groups

As expressed by informants NA and IK:

“The relationship between us and the miners is primarily based on strong verbal agreements, mutual trust, and shared understanding. We do not establish written contracts because this business remains informal and is grounded in long-standing personal relationships” (Interview with informants NA and IK, August 10, 2025).

Capital owners act as the regulators of operational activities, providers of primary mining facilities, and bearers of all daily production costs. The facilities provided include generators (*Yanmar*), water pumps (*Serumi*), wooden supports for mining pits, excavation tools such as shovels and hoes, sacks for transporting rocks, and even daily consumption needs such as sugar and coffee. The investment value for each piece of equipment is relatively high, reaching approximately IDR 15,000,000 for a generator and IDR 20,000,000 for a water pump, excluding daily operational costs of around IDR 350,000–500,000.

Table 2. Monthly Expenditures of Gold Miners’ Households

No	Type of Expenditure	Household Expenditures of Gold Miners	
		Capital Owner	Miner
1	Rice	IDR 350,000	IDR 250,000
2	Vegetables/Side Dishes	IDR 500,000	IDR 450,000
3	Cooking Oil, Sugar, Coffee	IDR 250,000	IDR 200,000
4	Kitchen Spices	IDR 40,000	IDR 35,000
5	Electricity	IDR 500,000	IDR 141,000
6	Children’s Allowance	IDR 2,130,000	IDR 1,075,000
7	Medicines (Health)	IDR 30,000	IDR 30,000
8	Fuel	IDR 286,000	IDR 200,000
9	Equipment Maintenance	IDR 800,000	-
	Total	IDR 4,886,000	IDR 2,381,000

Based on Table 2, the average cost of living that must be borne by gold miners’ families and capital owners each month can be observed. Rice constitutes the most essential need for miners’ households, as they generally do not come from farming families that produce their own rice annually; therefore, they must purchase it. After rice, the need for side dishes becomes the second most important necessity. The cost of these food items varies from month to month. Meanwhile, the income earned from gold mining is uncertain and often only sufficient to meet basic household needs. With such limited and unstable income, miners are required to fulfill their daily family necessities. Consequently, they choose to work as gold miners as a means of sustaining their household livelihoods.

Distribution and Sales Network of Gold from Traditional Mining

This finding highlights an informal yet well-organized system of distribution and sales of mined gold. Miners are not only involved in extraction and processing activities but are also connected to an established gold marketing network that has existed for a long time. Field findings indicate that the process of selling gold from mining activities in Lebong Tambang Village has formed a structured informal distribution system that operates across generations. Based on interviews with NA (capital owner) and AB and TI (miners), gold is sold through three main channels: local *toke* (collectors) in the village, who serve as the primary intermediaries between miners and larger buyers outside the

area; gold traders in the cities of Curup and Bengkulu, where transactions are conducted either directly or through intermediaries; and external distribution networks, particularly to Padang, Palembang, and Jakarta, where selling prices tend to be higher due to larger purchase volumes.

Factors Driving Community Involvement in Traditional Gold Mining Activities

Traditional gold mining in Lebong Tambang Village is not merely an underground economic activity but has become a social reality embedded within the community's structure of life. Based on field data obtained from interviews with six key informants, it was found that community involvement in mining is driven by several interrelated factors. At least four main categories were identified: economic, social, geographical, and educational factors. Each of these factors illustrates how structural and cultural conditions in the village have created a mining ecosystem that continues to persist.

The economic factor is the dominant motive driving community participation, primarily to meet daily living needs. According to miners, working in mining is considered a "rational choice under constraint." With limited formal employment opportunities in the village and high household expenses, mining becomes the primary option for obtaining quick income.

The social factor relates to togetherness and traditions passed down through generations. Mining is not only seen as a job but also as part of a social identity inherited within families. Informant NA explained that he had been involved in mining since the age of 14, following in his father's footsteps. In mining communities such as Lebong, this activity has become part of everyday life, with teenagers already being introduced to the work.

Geographical factors and weak law enforcement also contribute significantly. The location of Lebong Tambang Village, which is relatively distant from government centers and supervisory infrastructure, allows mining activities to continue with minimal interference. Informants HI and FI stated that there has been little to no strict law enforcement in the area, despite mining activities being openly conducted in multiple locations, even near public facilities such as schools and main roads.

The educational factor is reflected in low levels of public awareness and limited legal and environmental literacy. Most miners have relatively low educational backgrounds, ranging from elementary to junior high school graduates. Informants NA and NI reported that they had never received formal education or outreach regarding the environmental and legal impacts of mining. Some miners are even unaware that their activities are classified as hazardous.

Impacts of Traditional Gold Mining in Lebong Tambang Village

From a social perspective, traditional gold mining has led to shifts in the community's social structure. As income from mining increases, new social stratification emerges between those involved in mining and those who are not. According to informants HI and IK, noticeable social inequality has developed, where mining families are perceived as more economically advantaged, while non-mining households often feel marginalized. Additionally, while mining activities were previously characterized by strong familial relationships, conflicts have become more frequent due to competition over mining sites and the influx of outside workers.

Economically, gold mining provides quick income but also creates a concerning dependency. Many residents who previously worked as farmers or laborers have shifted to mining because it is perceived as more profitable. Informants AB and NI stated that mining income can reach IDR 3,000,000–3,500,000 per month during productive periods; however, this income is highly unstable and unpredictable. Informants NN and IB also mentioned that sometimes they earn only IDR 1,000,000–2,000,000 per month, and occasionally nothing at all. Nevertheless, they continue mining due to the lack of alternative employment.

Environmental impact is the most critical issue associated with gold mining activities. Based on statements from NA and NI, the community is aware that mining causes environmental degradation, particularly due to the use of mercury and the direct disposal of waste into rivers.

In terms of health and occupational safety, risks pose a serious threat to miners. Informants AB and NI revealed that accidents such as pit collapses, injuries from tools, and respiratory problems are common occurrences. The lack of personal protective equipment and poor mining infrastructure make workers highly vulnerable to occupational

hazards. Informant HI admitted that he stopped mining after experiencing severe respiratory problems and has since shifted to working as a trader.

Economic and Social Survival Strategies in Traditional Gold Mining Communities

Adaptation Strategies to Uncertain Mining Yields One of the greatest challenges in gold mining is the high level of uncertainty in production outcomes. There is no guarantee that a full day's hard work will yield any gold. In some cases, as expressed by informant AB, miners may work for days or even weeks without finding any gold at all. Nevertheless, perseverance and hope serve as the primary driving forces that keep them returning to the mining pits every day. In this context, livelihood strategies and informal savings mechanisms become crucial as buffers against economic crises.

Livelihood Diversification and Informal Savings as Crisis Reserves When mining pits are no longer productive or when economic conditions deteriorate significantly, miners do not remain idle. They seek alternative sources of income, even if temporary. Informant NI, for example, helps his parents with farming and sells agricultural produce on a small scale. Informant AB occasionally works as a market laborer or takes on goods transportation jobs. Although the income from these activities is lower than mining, they serve as important coping strategies. **Mutual Cooperation and Solidarity as Survival Mechanisms** Amid the harsh realities of gold mining, the value of mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*) becomes a fundamental social foundation that strengthens community resilience. Informants NA and AN explained that all mining activities are carried out collectively, from excavation to processing. Each individual has a specific role and depends on others. Without cooperation, mining operations would not be possible.

DISCUSSION

There are three previous studies relevant to this research. First, the study by Oktryaningsih, Afifi, and Senopati (2024) found that illegal gold mining in Lalar Liang Village has dual impacts on the community. Economically, it provides rapid and significant income for participating households. Socially, however, it leads to conflicts between local residents and migrants, as well as a decline in social solidarity due to competition over mining land and weak government presence. Both this study and the present research examine gold mining as a primary livelihood and identify economic factors as a strong driving force for continued mining despite high risks. Both also highlight social, economic, and environmental implications, such as income inequality and dependency on mining. However, the previous study focuses more on long-term impacts such as income inequality, labor exploitation, and declining social cohesion, whereas this study emphasizes the underlying factors driving community involvement (economic, socio-cultural, educational, legal, and geographical factors).

Second, the study by Tongkotow, Pati, and Posumah (2023) focuses on complex social and economic issues that drive communities to engage in illegal mining. The study highlights both horizontal conflicts (among community members) and vertical conflicts (between communities and authorities). Economic and social factors are identified as the primary drivers, while environmental degradation exacerbates these conflicts. Similar to the present study, it examines community involvement influenced by socio-economic factors and identifies social issues arising from mining activities. However, the previous study emphasizes conflict dynamics, while this research focuses more on the background factors (both internal and external) influencing community participation, including inherited traditions and geographical conditions.

Third, the study by Niwele, Mataheru, and Taufik (2021) highlights the use of hazardous chemicals such as mercury and cyanide in illegal mining, which poses serious risks to environmental sustainability and public health. It also discusses the efforts of law enforcement agencies to address illegal mining, despite challenges such as limited supervision, resource constraints, and supporting networks. This study provides insight into legal and environmental challenges in remote areas. While both studies address the negative environmental and health impacts of mining and acknowledge weak supervision, the previous study focuses more on legal enforcement and environmental issues, whereas this research emphasizes community motivations and adopts a multidimensional phenomenological approach. Additionally, Niwele's study highlights supporting networks of illegal mining, while this study emphasizes socio-cultural aspects (such as inherited mining traditions and group solidarity) and geographical factors.

Phenomenological Perspective of Alfred Schutz The phenomenological approach of Alfred Schutz provides a deep and comprehensive lens for understanding social reality (Ritzer, 2014), particularly in the context of Lebong Tambang Village, where traditional gold mining practices are embedded in daily life. Through this approach, it becomes possible to understand how the community interprets mining activities as part of their lifeworld.

From Schutz's perspective, human actions are not merely responses to economic pressures but are social actions shaped by past experiences and future goals. The *because motive* can be seen in the long history of mining in the village, intergenerational traditions, and family experiences that normalize mining as an acceptable occupation. Many informants stated that they were introduced to mining at a young age and grew up in a social environment where mining is viewed as a common and respectable job.

Meanwhile, the *in-order-to motive* reflects the community's goals in engaging in mining, such as earning income, meeting daily needs, and maintaining household economic stability. In conditions of limited economic opportunities and scarce alternative employment, mining is perceived as the most realistic option despite its risks.

This phenomenon demonstrates how community actions are shaped by the interplay between structural conditions and subjective experiences. The lifeworld of gold mining has formed patterns of social interaction, solidarity, and work values that are passed down across generations. Mining groups operate through organized and interdependent systems, building strong social networks to survive in unstable working conditions. At the same time, mining activities have created new social norms, such as dependency on mining income, increased competition over mining locations, and shifts in the village's social structure.

Ultimately, the phenomenon of traditional gold mining is not merely an economic issue but a complex social phenomenon deeply rooted in the everyday lives of the community. Therefore, addressing this issue cannot rely solely on legal approaches but must also consider the socio-cultural conditions that shape the lifeworld of the people in Lebong Tambang Village.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research and discussion, it can be concluded that this activity is not merely driven by economic needs, but is also influenced by historical factors, geographical conditions, and local values embedded in daily life. Mining is carried out collectively through informal mechanisms based on trust and solidarity, forming a socio-economic system that coexists with formal legal structures but plays a more direct role in sustaining community livelihoods.

In Alfred Schutz's theory, the *because motive* explains that mining activities in Lebong Tambang Village originate from past experiences passed down across generations. Many residents began mining at a young age by following their parents or relatives. Limited formal education and restricted employment opportunities have contributed to the استمرار of this tradition. Mining is not merely an occupation, but a continuation of habitual practices considered normal. This historical motive shapes the perception that mining is a natural part of life. Thus, mining actions emerge from a framework of meaning embedded in collective consciousness.

The concept of *in-order-to motive* reflects that the decision to engage in mining is driven by urgent economic needs. Amid limited employment alternatives, mining becomes a quick way to earn income despite its risks. The immediate financial returns make mining more attractive than formal employment. Miners act pragmatically, often without long-term planning. This choice represents a form of rationality under constrained conditions—they mine not because they want to, but because they have to.

The concept of *lifeworld* illustrates how mining has shaped the community's entire way of life. Mining is not only a source of income but also a social space that forms values, norms, and solidarity. Mutual cooperation and informal profit-sharing systems are integral parts of daily life. This world operates without formal regulations yet remains socially structured and cohesive. Mining shapes the collective mindset and behavior of the community. Therefore, any intervention must consider the social meanings embedded within mining practices.

Based on the research findings and discussion, several recommendations are proposed. For local governments, stricter supervision and policies are needed, along with a persuasive approach toward mining communities. Authorities should provide alternative economic empowerment programs such as skills training, village cooperatives, and

environmentally friendly micro-enterprises to reduce dependency on gold mining. For the community of Lebond Tambang Village, it is important to increase awareness of the negative impacts of gold mining, particularly environmental degradation and health risks due to hazardous chemical use. Legal companies or investors are expected to collaborate with local governments to develop formal mining operations, create safer employment opportunities, and ensure environmentally controlled management.

For academics and future researchers, this study is expected to serve as a reference and comparative material for similar research. It emphasizes that a phenomenological approach provides deeper insight into social meaning and the subjective consciousness of mining actors. Therefore, further research should expand the scope of analysis by examining public policy aspects related to traditional gold mining.

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