Learning to Find Out: Theories of Knowledge and Learning in Field Research

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Learning How to Find Out:
Theories of Knowledge and Learning in Field Research

by Cati Coe

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Abstract

In *Learning how to Ask* (1992), Charles Briggs argues that asking questions follows cultural conventions. Fieldworkers carry assumptions about the nature of talk and knowledge, and their questions may elicit different kinds of information and relationships than expected. This essay looks ethnographically at theories of knowledge in Akuapem, Ghana, and how they interacted with my own native theories in interviews. Learning local conventions of knowledge-transmission thus becomes one of the major tasks for the fieldworker.
Mepɛ ɛn anka mihu wɔn amanne, nanso enye ɛn wubisabisa asem pii.

I would have wanted to see [understand] their customs, but it was not appropriate to ask many questions.

—Diary of Basel missionary Andreas Riis of his journey to Kumase, 1839, stay in Fomana, December 11, 1839, originally in German, translated into Twi by N. Clerk and printed in *Kristofo Senkekafo* (Christian Messenger) (1917), 78-79 (translation to English mine)

In *Out of Our Minds* (2000), Johannes Fabian examines the practices of scientific inquiry of explorers in Central Africa who made up some of anthropologists’ ancestors. In the former Gold Coast (now Ghana), such ancestors included missionaries like Andreas Riis, who researched local customs and languages for the purpose of converting Africans to Christianity. Reading missionaries’ reflections on their travails in the Gold Coast, I was surprised and shocked to see parallels to my fieldwork difficulties in Akuapem, Ghana. In his statement above, after eleven years of living and working in the Gold Coast, primarily in Akuapem, Riis reflects an awareness of the limits of asking questions, which may have been for him, as it was for me, a primary route to understanding.

This paper explores the problematics of interviewing in Akuapem. The speech genre of interviewing was not a local genre of speaking or knowledge transmission. Anthropologists have been concerned with epistemological issues in terms of experimenting with more dialogic or more visibly subjective or multigenre representational practices (Behar 1996, Rose 1990, Clifford and Marcus 1983) and in examining the power relations in which ethnographic knowledge is produced (Fabian 2000, Asad 1973). However, anthropologists have not been similarly engaged in examining and transforming field methods to reflect those epistemological
concerns (but see Wolf 1996). Rather, within anthropology, field methods remain unexamined and mysterious. As a result, students may come back from difficult fieldwork experiences looking for greater rigor in field methods, feeling that the problem was in their training, not in the methods themselves. Anthropologists need to participate in conversations about field methods, in order to argue explicitly against behaviorist, naturalist, and reductionist perspectives of fieldwork, in which “the object of anthropological inquiry is the ‘stuff out there’ and that that stuff has as two of its primary attributes stability and observability (Karp and Kendall 1982, 251). The epistemological issues that anthropologists have been raising in regard to representation should be brought to bear on field methods, both in considering local ways of knowledge production and in focusing on the co-construction of meaning, rather than its discovery, within fieldwork.

One exception to this lack of interest in field methods within anthropology is Charles Briggs’ Learning How to Ask (1992). Here, he argues that interviews are a multifaceted speech event, encapsulating the native theories of communication of researchers, rather than those of respondents. As a result, interviews often involve mis-communication and mis-interpretation. He describes how his questions of Mexicanos in northern New Mexico were met with the response, “Who knows?” Researchers come to the field with specific rhetorical modes which may or may not make sense to the people to whom we talk. Briggs argues that researchers should listen to and imitate local metacommunicative strategies before actively participating in such exchanges by asking questions; they first need to learn how to ask.

However, these difficulties go beyond a lack of correspondence in researcher and native communicative frames. Briggs suggests this when he argues that researchers’ folk belief of language foregrounds the referential or descriptive function of language, pointing to objects,
people, events, and processes, and ignores the speech act (as speech act) and its context. Thus, researchers’ native beliefs highlight the informational content of language, rather than, for instance, its role in re-defining the relationship between the speaker and listener. Briggs thus points out some of the assumptions behind researchers’ native theories of knowledge.

What are researchers’ native theories about knowledge? Michel Foucault (1990) describes the process by which sex, first the object of Christian confession, became medicalized during the 19th century. Truth must be told, and its telling liberates the one who confesses. However, confession requires an interlocutor, a person in authority, who can interpret: “the work of producing the truth was obliged to pass through this relationship if it was to be scientifically validated” (66). Although he is analyzing the roots of psychology, this route for the production of scientific knowledge may also hold for ethnography, in which recitation is therapeutic and knowledge is transformative. Knowledge in and of itself is considered desirable and essential to progress. Many of our field methods assume that knowledge has to be verbalized and explained in order to be valid (Mavanhão 1993); it does not reside in successful practice or bodily experience.¹

As Foucault and others have shown, this desire to know the intimacies of people is connected to regimes of discipline and power. Those in power, both emperors and corporate managers, desire “systematic social knowledge written down” in order to best manage and direct (Rose 1990, 31; Bendix 2000). Thus, the desire to know of those in power helps sustain ethnographers’ use of language that expresses literal meanings (referential language) and representation of knowledge that is decontextualized and independent of the circumstances in which it was produced.
Recent studies of learning are important here. Rather than conceiving of “knowledge” or learning as internalized or something acquired, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) talk about learning as situated practice. As a result, knowledge is never “out there,” a stable and observable object, but is distributed throughout the complex structure of people acting in that context (Lave 1993). Knowledge is enacted, discussed, and negotiated by people who know different things and speak with different interests and experiences as they constitute a situation together. Thus conflict is ubiquitous to human existence, including learning. I argue here that not only should we pay attention to local metacommunicative practices but also to local meta-theories of knowledge, which form the basis for respondents’ interpretation of what our research activities mean and what we are seeking. We need to make sure our epistemological concerns, reflected in theoretical debates and representational practices, also govern our field methods, in understanding how “knowledge of the socially constructed world is socially mediated” (Lave and Wenger 1991, 51).

This paper explores the mutually incommensurable modes of discourse and knowledge-production invoked by my conducting life-history interviews as part of an ethnographic study of the production of national culture in schools in Akuapem, Ghana. My struggle with local genres of knowledge-transmission made me look more closely at the construction of knowledge and practices of learning in schools and community contexts. I urge researchers to attend to the breaks, misinterpretations, and silence in interviews and conversations, not only because they help us to frame more appropriate and useful questions, as Briggs suggests, but local theories of knowledge may themselves be more central to the topics we (as knowledge brokers and producers) study than they first appear.
Akuapem and the Nation, Christianity and Culture

Akuapem is a hilly area in the Eastern Region of Ghana. Its seventeen towns lie on a low-lying hill range, ranging from 1,200 to 1,600 feet high (Blay 1972). Numerous smaller villages are in the valleys near the farms, and migration has long pulled people away from their towns. However, mansions in the towns show that people are fiercely loyal to their hometown: they return home for festivals and funerals on weekends, and this is where they will build a house if they can. Towns in Akuapem compete with one another, and conflicts between them have been heightened by inhabitants’ knowledge of their town’s history, told with an awareness of ethnic identity and past injustices.

The first settlers of Akuapem were Guan-speaking. However, since the seventeenth century, Akuapem has been conquered and ruled by Akan (Twi)-speaking peoples, of whom the first were the Akwamus, who engaged in linguistic imperialism, forcing accused persons detained in court to learn Twi to defend themselves. Local historians in Akuapem recount the atrocities of the Akwamus as a reason for Akuapems asking the rulers of Akyem Abuakwa for help in a war to overthrow the Akwamu rulers. After the Akwamus had been defeated and driven across the Volta river, the Akyem warriors asked Akuapem for a reward for helping them, and, since the Akuapems had no gold, they asked the Akyems to rule them. The Akyems, also an Akan people, were given land to settle at the present-day towns of Akropong and Amanokrom. They brought in Akan political organization, appointing relatives and friends to important posts and organizing the seventeen towns into a traditional Akan hierarchical arrangement that was based on military formations. Akropong became the capital of the new kingdom with the paramount chief. This history is re-activated today with Guan ethnic
consciousness and the *de facto* disintegration of the Akuapem traditional state into several independent states during the 1990s (Gilbert 1997).

I went to Akuapem to study the production of national culture in schools in Ghana. Ghana seemed to be an especially fascinating place to study the way that governments were attempting to jumpstart national development through the cultivation of “heritage” in the nation’s youth. I sought to understand the forces—social, intellectual, and ideological—behind the promotion of “Ghanaian culture” in schools, and the reasons why people fought for and through culture. I also planned to look at how a national curriculum and cultural policy was transformed by social actors in schools in Akuapem. My research focused on how schools become sites for the production, invention, and objectification of national culture, as constituted not only by government officials and national elites, but also by local actors.

The (P)NDC government of Ghana that came to power in 1981 seemed especially interested in producing a national culture and rejuvenating “tradition,” writing a new cultural policy, promoting “national” festivals, and instituting the teaching of “culture” in schools (National Commission on Culture 1991). The school-based program has two components. As part of a World Bank-sponsored education reform, a subject called “Cultural Studies” was added to the national syllabus for the first nine years of education in 1986, in which students studied music, dance, life-cycle customs, verbal art, and religion in classroom settings. Another, more popular, method has involved cultural competitions between schools, in which students perform in the categories of drum language, poetry recital, choral music, and dance-drama and display their work in arts and crafts exhibits.

Interviews were only one method of study among many to understand the ideological reasons for and the unintended effects of this incorporation of cultural traditions into schools. I
lived in the town of Akropong, Akuapem for twelve months from August 1998 to August 1999 (a school year). I observed classroom lessons on cultural traditions and other subjects, rehearsals for cultural competitions, and the competitions themselves; attended church services, annual festivals, and Sunday school services; and did historical research in regional and national archives. In seeking to understand the complex effects of the production of national culture in Ghana, I focused on three areas: 1) historically, the process by which “culture” became an object of discourse, a selection of the complex flow of cultural practices, and associated with the nation; 2) contemporary competing discourses about “culture” and the way that students and teachers negotiated between government policy and Christian identifications in classrooms and performances; and 3) the impact of the teaching of “culture” in the schools on students’ relationship to knowledge. Using these three foci, I documented the complicated, problematic effects of cultural programming directed toward youth through the institution of schools in a postcolonial African nation. I examined how the practices and meanings of schools in one area (Akuapem) transformed the ideological intent of government cultural programming, even as that programming created different possibilities than were otherwise available in schools.

I was introduced to Akuapem by a retired intellectual who promoted his town to outsiders, especially to foreigners, thus serving as a broker of outside influences. A former language teacher, he had taught many of the teachers in the schools, and thus facilitated my entry into schools. However, this serendipity also made sense from a research perspective. A hilly place, and thus considered healthier for Europeans, the Akuapem ridge—and Akropong in particular—became the headquarters for the Basel missionaries in the Gold Coast in the 1840s. Akuapem has a long history of exposure to Christianity and schooling and a high rate of literacy (Kwamena-Poh 1973). The churches in Ghana are opposed to traditional customs, an
antagonism vividly shown when Ephraim Amu, a music teacher at the Akropong Presbyterian Teacher’s College, was expelled from the church and the College for wearing African cloth to church in 1931 (Agyemang 1988). Akuapem is not representative of Ghana, but it is a place that highlights certain tensions that have relevance beyond Akuapem: the ideological tensions between Christianity and “tradition,” the structural tensions of an economy built on farmers but which rewards urban dwellers and those close to the state, and the fluctuating loyalties to hometown, ethnicity, and nation.

**Asking Many Questions: The Process of Doing Oral Histories**

When I began my fieldwork in Akuapem in August 1998, I decided that during the first few months when I expected to be slowly gaining entree into schools, I would concentrate on the historical incorporation of tradition in Akuapem schools. I wondered whether the teaching of culture in classroom lessons dated further back than the educational reform of 1986, perhaps to the late colonial days in the 1930s and 1940s or the heady days of early independence in the 1960s. Knowing of the paucity of written documentation in the archives from a two-month exploratory trip in 1997, I hoped to study the ideological reasons for interest in traditional culture through oral history interviews with teachers, asking them about their experiences as students and teachers from the 1940s onwards. Although the teaching of culture was a national reform, I was curious as to whether teachers had been active in promoting Ghanaian heritage which the government had then adopted. From the few people I knew, I gathered an initial list of names of older teachers with an interest in culture, and from there, used snowball sampling techniques, in which those I interviewed would recommend others to me. I ended up conducting interviews with ten people, stopping before I interviewed all those recommended to me. Those I did
interview were elderly men, ranging in age from their 60s to their 90s; they were retired teachers or ministers who had been teachers early in their careers. Their English was quite good. Initially, I conducted interviews in English; later, we spoke Twi, with English occasionally used when I did not understand what had been said or when I had difficulty expressing myself. Sometimes those doing the recommending would accompany me on my first visit to introduce me; other times, they would tell me to mention their names. Needless to say, I had forgotten Briggs’ advice about first observing and imitating local speech genres before embarking on interviewing; I was concerned about accomplishing all I had to do and thus proceeded with what I saw as my “work.”

I will describe what happened during a series of visits and interviews that took place over the course of a month with Mr. Asante (a pseudonym), as an example for what commonly happened during interviews. He was one of my first key informants, and thus the difficulties with the process were magnified. During the first visit to Mr. Asante, the visit of contact, as I thought of it, I introduced myself and described my project: I was interested in the teaching of “culture” (the local term) such as proverbs, music and dance, and arts and crafts in the primary and junior-secondary schools (the first nine years of education). However, I needed some context for the reform, and so I hoped Mr. Asante could tell me about how these things were taught when he went to and taught school. I said that I was writing my “long essay,” the word used in teacher-training colleges and universities for “thesis.” I explained that I wanted to tape-record, saying that I wanted to conduct the interviews in whatever language would be most comfortable for Mr. Asante, but maybe he would say something in Twi that I would not understand well, and I could go back and listen to it again if it was taped. I also wanted to remember what he said. I would be happy to give him copies of the tapes. Mr. Asante said that
he would prepare something to read for the tape. I assured him that that was not necessary, but he ignored my protestations. He seemed excited and eager about the process. He told me that he was very pleased with my visit and that he had a lot of documents to show me. He also talked about his life history and introduced me to his family. We then made arrangements for a day I should return.  

On the second visit, I again described my topic in Twi, and Mr. Asante began telling me about how crafts were taught in his primary school in Akropong, and then continued with his biography and the state of arts and crafts as he continued training in different places and became a teacher, moving from school to school in different towns across southern Ghana. During this process, he emphasized dates and places. He was uncomfortable with my turning on the tape-recorder but he allowed me to take notes as he spoke. When he came to the end of his biography, Mr. Asante asked me what I wanted to study, and I explained a little bit more, changing my question to reflect his interest in arts and crafts. He told me that one reason he was helping me was because he felt that he should be documenting his life to pass on all the things he had seen and done. Although he considered himself an artist rather than a teacher, he felt he should be thinking now about teaching art to young children, because of my interests. He then told me the origin of his name, and about his former wife who had died some years ago and his children. He then invited me over for an evening meal, an invitation which I accepted.

At the next meeting, about ten days after we had had the meal prepared by his new wife, he let me turn on the tape-recorder, while he read from notes that he had prepared for this occasion and from an autobiography that he wrote in the 1980s. The notes he had prepared seemed to be the beginning of a textbook he was writing about claywork for teachers in primary and junior-secondary schools, detailing the importance of claywork, how to prepare the clay, and
methods of firing and decorating the clay pieces. At the end of this meeting, after an hour and a half of his reading into the tape, I went home utterly bewildered, wondering what had happened. What had I said that made him think I wanted a textbook on claywork? How had he misinterpreted my interest in the teaching of “culture” in the classroom as a request for a textbook on claywork? I looked back at what I had said and done, but finally realized that we could only continue with our conversations at cross-purposes.

At the fifth visit, a week later, Mr. Asante continued his reading of the textbook he was writing and when he was finished reading what he had written, he continued reading into the tape a talk he had given at the Legon Festival of the Arts in 1977 on “Contemporary Forms of Artistic Expression.” After forty-five minutes, I used the clicking off of the recording, signaling the end of the tape, to divert the direction of our talk. Without touching the tape recorder, I asked more detailed questions of what had happened when he was trained at Achimota as an arts and crafts teacher and the goals of arts and crafts education at that time. I was desperate to get away from the general to the more descriptive and from the practical to the ideological. The conversation became very choppy at this point, with much more question-and-answer directed by me. As I went home, I felt deeply embarrassed that I had not simply turned over the tape and let him continue.

I did set up one more interview time, in which he asked me to turn on the tape recorder and began reading again from his textbook, saying he was “happy to continue our discussion of art education.” Again, when he had finished, I asked follow-up questions about his experience and about claywork, resulting in more choppy discussion. This was our last interview. However, I retained contact with Mr. Asante, returning every month or so when I was in the neighborhood. Sometimes, I would simply come to greet him and ask how he and his family
were doing; at others, I would give him an update of my research, to which he might respond and elaborate. I wrote in June 1999 after a visit, “It feels as if I have to tell people what I am finding and not finding and getting them involved in that way.” One time, he borrowed my tape-recorder and some tapes to interview relatives about his family history.

These patterns in interviewing were similar with other key informants, although other informants talked about the history of their town, the history of the missionaries and church in Akuapem, and the development of church music, instead of claywork. They all took great responsibility for the accuracy of the information they were giving me, often reading from documents or books in their possession, although Mr. Asante was the only one who created a book for my benefit. Because of this situation, they told me information in which they were expert and used to giving out; I was not the only supplicant for information for many of my informants. Thus, I was given lectures; I was given codified information which had movement and an order, in the sense of having a beginning, a middle, and an end, such as a historical narrative or the introduction to a subject in a textbook.

I was not sure what was going wrong. The people I talked to seemed kind, as if they wanted to help me, and the atmosphere felt positive. They were certainly working hard to help me. And yet our understandings and interpretations of our mutual interactions were quite different.

What “Culture” Meant, to Ghanaians and to Me

At the point that I began the interviews with Mr. Asante, I was not completely aware of local meanings of the word “culture” (or in Twi, ammamre) that I was using as a starting point in these interviews, although I did know it was a local term. People in Akuapem felt that “culture”
touched their lives only occasionally, at non-ordinary events: ritual ceremonies, festivals, and school cultural competitions. Embodied by chiefs, who were its caretakers, “culture” provided connections to ancestors and to the past. “Culture” was associated with performance, especially music and dance, and with traditional religious practices. Thus, it did not encompass Mr. Asante’s interest in arts and crafts. I had been operating under late colonial notions about “African culture” which did include local arts and crafts, because I had read about the founding of Achimota school in 1927, in which both arts and crafts and performance traditions were important as emblems of the teaching of African culture. The World Bank-sponsored Education Reform of 1986 had mandated the subject of Cultural Studies, as well as Vocational Studies which rejuvenated the teaching of the same arts and crafts as had been taught at Achimota. I assumed that there was ideological as well as practical continuity between Achimota and this reform. However, for people in Akuapem, vocational studies was considered to be preparation for employment (albeit manual) and had no connection to “culture,” which was considered somewhat frivolous to the main business of schooling.

I define culture differently from most Ghanaians. I see culture as encompassing the everyday, embodied and habitual, practices of people; this includes practices of Christianity and schooling and processes of appropriation of “Western” items and ideas. It is contextual and flexible: we enact it in specific settings among specific people. For instance, I would argue that there are school cultural traditions in Ghana, in which certain practices and speaking patterns have become natural and expected; in fact, school ways of transmitting knowledge was what I was eliciting in my interviews. But for many Ghanaians, “culture” meant “Ghanaian culture,” which could be avoided if one wished, or in which one could participate on Saturdays or specific
festival occasions. Through my interviews and other more mundane conversations, I did learn
the referent for the term “culture” and used it more appropriately thereafter.

**Local Notions of Experts**

I also realized that part of the problem was that I was looking at the wrong era. The
people recommended to me were elderly men who had grown up in the 1930s and 1940s, when
schools were under the control of the church; they were not terribly interested in my topic which
was considered antithetical to Christianity. Furthermore, the little information I was getting
about the past was terribly fragmented: as teachers, these men had moved around a great deal,
from teaching post to teaching post, so I could not reconstruct a history of education in
Akropong or even Akuapem, because they were teaching in one town, perhaps in the Central or
Brong-Ahafo Region or the north for three years, and in another town for the next eight.

It was the people currently in their forties and fifties, who had grown up in the era of
independence when the teaching of “culture” really took off, whom I realized I should be asking.
Perhaps I should be less interested in teachers, who had moved around from place to place, than
in people who had been students in Akropong. However, it was those who had not succeeded in
school who would still be living in Akropong, and these people were precisely those who were
not respected and would not be recommended to me as experts. Thus, snowball sampling is
problematic when one’s object of study is different from local peoples’ understanding of
important knowledge.

I did end up having some success asking questions about the history of the teaching of
“culture” with middle-aged teachers who I met when I visited schools. These were usually not
scheduled interviews, but conversations on the porch or in the teacher’s lounge in the early
morning or during breaks, elicited by my talking about my interests and what I was finding. They told more personal stories and were less concerned with accuracy, because of the lack of a tape-recorder, they knew me better at this point than my key informants did, and their stories were embedded in a back-and-forth conversation.

However, when I conducted interviews with them, even the middle-aged teachers would lecture about “culture” in the forms of various important customs, narrating to me the order of activities within a festival or ritual, for instance. Often, I felt I was breaking the frame of the conversation to ask about their personal histories and specific events or curricula in their personal experience. One problem was that the teaching of “culture” in schools was not considered knowledge in their sense. So, even when I used the term “culture” in a culturally appropriate way, even when I was talking to people who had personally experienced cultural programs in their schooling, they still wanted me to give me a body of knowledge, this time about “culture” itself, whereas I was asking about the cultural programs in schools. In order to understand the reasons for this, it is necessary to look at local theories about knowledge and learning in Akuapem.

Local Knowledges and Contexts of Learning

In Maurice Bloch’s ethnography of knowledge (1993), he distinguishes between different kinds of knowledge and communicative styles corresponding to different stages and statuses in the life-cycle of the Zafimaniry people of Madagascar. Children are associated with practical and scientific knowledge of the wild; married people with practical agricultural knowledge; and the elders with wisdom and history, so that with age, knowledge has decreasing relevance to the immediate environment and becomes more abstract. Bloch argues that literacy among the
Zafimaniry is seen as similar to elders’ knowledge, despite the fact that the majority of literates are young men.

Drawing inspiration from Bloch’s typology, I distinguish between three different kinds of knowledge that I saw operating in Akropong and in Akuapem more widely. One is a practical kind of knowledge, centered on ordinary, everyday tasks such as housework (cooking, washing, sweeping) and farming. Another is a specialized knowledge, such as carpentry, kente-weaving, and drumming, which depends on having access to contexts of performance through kinship or apprenticeship. A third is a knowledge focused on history (family and chiefly genealogies, the history of a town) and ritual practice. As I mentioned above, history (both church and town history) is an important speech genre in Akuapem, recited in church sermons, in ordinary conversations with elders showing off their knowledge in the form of nuggets of history, and during funerals.

Only some of these kinds of knowledges are identified as “cultural” by people in Akuapem: some of the specialized knowledges, especially drumming and dancing, are given this label, but more commonly, the abstract knowledge of history and rituals are so designated. These knowledges are gendered and also attest to the gerontocratic hierarchy operating in Akuapem: practical knowledge is available to everyone but is especially performed by young people and women, while the knowledge of ancient events and rituals is the most prestigious, not widely available, and in the possession of certain elders.

Competent performance is highly valued for all three knowledges, and even the most abstract knowledge is enacted: during funerals, genealogy is discussed in order to sort out issues of inheritance, and rituals are performed at festivals. Enactment might involve a display of verbal artistry. Accuracy means a great deal in public enactment. Performing badly in public
results in personal humiliation and loss of reputation (see Yankah 1995); mistakes in ritual performance might end in punishment (even death) from angry spirits or ancestors.

The most powerful and sacred knowledge is considered secret, which is used to bolster the status of certain elders and chiefs. Just as the chiefs are protected from the profane world by the mediation of their *akyeame* or spokesmen (Yankah 1995), so too are powerful objects and events kept hidden and protected by indirection and secrecy. Most cultural and historical knowledge is considered to be secret and held by the elders; thus, it is called “*mpanyinsem*” or elders’ matters. The secret nature of this knowledge is noted by authors in books that make that knowledge public. In a popular book documenting the various festivals of Ghana, A. A. Opoku wrote in the preface that it is difficult to give acknowledgments “in a book dealing with what is sacred and to some extent, secret in our cultural heritage” (1970, preface). In a review of two books documenting different Akan festivals, I. E. Boama (1954) wrote,

> Twifo afahye mmienu a eṣe se ṣkanni ba biara bo mmødën ṣwe ne Adee ne Odwira. Nanko nnipa pìi wọ ho a, se wọahu saa afahye yi mpo a, na ẹye ọfa ne fa bi kwa. Efise emu adeye turodoo no de, gye tiri-ho-nam nkutoo na wonya kwan hu . . . . Wo nso a wọye ọman ba, to bi kenkan, na wunim wo man ho ahintasem a, wonkyi.

Two Twi festivals which every Akan should try to watch are Adée [Adae] and Odwira. But there are many people who even if they have seen these festivals, they have seen only a part. Because only insiders have permission to see the true [or pure] activities. . . . If you are a citizen [lit. child of the nation], buy [these books] to read, and if you know your nation’s secrets, you won’t avoid them.

(translation by Afari Amoako and me)
Cultural knowledge, at its deepest or most pure, was thus considered hidden, not accessible to outsiders; books documenting them violated that secrecy by describing rituals to non-royals and youth.

Some history was also considered secret. As we walked down the main street of Larteh one day, one of my key informants, Teacher Asiedu told me about doing his senior thesis for Presbyterian Training College in 1957 on the history of Larteh, and he came to talk to one elder in his hometown. When he visited one elder,

The elder told him he would not tell him anything unless he brought drinks, and by the time he returned, the elder had died. Another elder would not tell him anything, and Teacher Asiedu, then a young man, rebuked him, saying, ‘If you don’t tell, then how will the children learn?’

‘Why wouldn’t they say anything?’ I asked Teacher Asiedu in Twi. “Wosuro” (they are afraid), he said.

‘What were they afraid of?’ I asked. He said that they were afraid that they would reveal something secret and the ɔbosom (spirit) would punish them. (fieldnotes, 19 February 1999)

The secrecy of certain historical and cultural knowledge allows powerful elders to manipulate important decisions regarding property rights and political positions, which are entwined with family genealogy and local history. As William Murphy (1980) points out, the content of the hidden knowledge does not matter as much as the privileged society the secrecy creates.

Although all the forms of knowledge in the community highlight their enactment, whether during morning housework or festivals or rituals in sacred groves, schooling in Akuapem is notable for its teaching of knowledge that is not practical and not useful, in which knowledge is made abstract and into a game of word-reproduction, a litany to be learned and not questioned, with very little relevance to everyday life. Classroom teaching—and the pattern became increasingly clear and strong at higher levels of schooling—consisted of teachers having
a discussion: teachers asked directed questions in which the explicit goal was to elicit student knowledge but students recognized that they were supposed to figure out the answer in the teacher’s mind. The discussion would result in various lists and definitions being put on the board. Then, “notes” would be given, in which the teacher would write down sentences and paragraphs on the topic on the board, often duplicating the points of the previous discussion, and students would copy these notes into their notebooks. These notes would form the basis of exercises, questions in school tests, and (it was assumed) the nation-wide exams. Sometimes, for homework or classwork, the teacher would write questions on the board, based on the notes, and students would write the answers in their notebooks. “Notes” give students the opportunity to review information from the board by copying it down into their own notebooks. This is a labor-intensive and mechanical process. Notebooks are often the material objects around which lessons revolve: students hurry to copy notes down from the board, they are collected to be graded by the teacher who often has stacks of notebooks on his or her table, after which they need to be distributed again and corrections made. Notes are therefore an important mechanism for turning everyday knowledge into school knowledge, and verbalizing embodied knowledge through English words, definitions, and lists.

The decontextualized and abstract nature of school knowledge makes it akin to historical knowledge and knowledge of the elders, although the fact that it is taught to children results in a simplification and flattening of that knowledge, something I discuss elsewhere in more detail (Coe 2000). Unlike historical and cultural knowledge, however, school knowledge is only useful in its reproduction on exam papers.

The Performance of Expertise
I discuss these kinds of knowledge because they structured how people responded and made sense of my questions. It seems to me that many of my key informants considered my requests to be requests for school knowledge: their recitation from documents and my reproduction of those words and facts through the tape-recorder or through writing looked similar to the form of knowledge transmission from teacher to student, minus a blackboard. This resulted in formalized, codified knowledge, not personal experience. My questions about “culture” elicited descriptions of customs and rituals from middle-aged teachers who were teaching those descriptions currently or who had been taught those descriptions in their youth. Accuracy was important in the sense of correct performance, where informants took care to present true information, an anxiety increased by my recording.

I was not the only one seeking information from them. Teacher Asiedu made sure that I knew that other people came to him for information about the history of his town. He commented, complimenting me at the same time, Because people with wisdom came to visit him, his children will also think that he is wise. To a young teacher who stopped by in the middle of my visit, Teacher Asiedu said that we had come to learn “mpanyinsem” or elders’ matters from him. Thus, my informants felt that my questions contributed to their status and authority as knowledgeable elders in the public eye or within their families. Teacher Asiedu in particular had transformed himself from retired teacher to elder in the town, ɔkyeame to the chief, and he may have seen my interests as more in the nature of mpanyinsem than school knowledge.

In order to highlight their expertise, my key informants indexed their age and experience through their narration of their life history, listing the dates and places of their birth, schooling, teaching posts, further education, later positions, and retirement. Sometimes this narration would
include a explanation of their names and discussion of family history, as we saw with Mr.
Asante. After several experiences of this, I learned to ask for this kind of life-history. I
remember that the first time I did this, the informant’s wife, who was listening to our interview,
gave a satisfied grunt, showing the appropriateness of this question. Other questions that
indexed my informants’ age and experience proved fruitful, such as asking for comparisons
between the past and present. Elders often compared the present with the past to highlight their
knowledge and to critique present-day matters. I learned to ask, “What was education like in
your time?” and as a follow-up, “What has changed since?” thus inviting critique of the present.
Both these questions showed respect for their expertise and experience and elicited specific
speech genres associated with elderly men, thus helping to construct the interview context as that
of an elder teaching a young person.

I was glad to be told their life stories because I saw it as an avenue for asking more
specific questions about their schooling and teaching experiences. However, my informants did
not understand why I was asking questions about it; they wanted to tell me their perspective and
knowledge whole, as a package, seamless and smooth. My changing the direction of the
conversation and interrupting their lecture on the topic was not respectful of their age and
expertise. In fact, asking about their personal experience may have been interpreted as a
challenge to their authority--Do you really know this? Were you really there?

My goal was a conversational, open-ended interview, free-flowing and informal (Jackson
1986, Rubin and Rubin 1995); my respondents’ understanding of the interview turned out to be
more formal, in which they were imparting codified, accurate knowledge as elders to a young
person, or as teachers to a student. Therefore, my emic notion of what a conversational
interview should be, supported by my professional training, elicited a genre of talk in Akuapem (mpanyinsɛm) that was more formal, systematized, and careful than I expected or wanted.

**Other Methods**

I visited schools and observed classroom lessons on “culture” and other subjects. I continued attending church services around town, conversing with people who stopped me on the street, and going to festivals and other rituals. I talked to young adults in the family with whom I was living, visited teachers in their homes, and was adopted and protected by two older women teachers. I maintained contact with anyone I met and kept visiting them. I relied on informal conversations, letting others direct the conversation and asking a question if there was an opportunity. I gained entree to situations accompanying acquaintances and friends to church, parties, and the market, and visiting them in their homes and schools.

As secondary schools began preparing for cultural competitions in February, I accompanied the district cultural studies officer as he gave workshops to teachers, and then picked three secondary schools to follow as they rehearsed and then performed. I interviewed judges of the competitions, with varying success, depending on their interest in “culture.” I also conducted focus group discussion with performers and some individual interviews after the competition. The group discussions worked better than the ones with individual students: my power was diminished in a group and students corrected each other and elaborated on others’ statements. In all these interviews, people wanted to describe various traditional customs for me, and I slowly negotiated what I wanted, asking questions about their experience with cultural competitions in their primary and junior-secondary school, the rationale for their performances, and their mode of learning. However, because we had a common basis (the rehearsals and
cultural competition) for discussion, I could ask more knowledgeable questions. I also felt that adolescents were more open with me than adults. None of these interviews lasted longer than one session of an hour or an hour and a half.

Watching the rehearsals for the cultural competitions and festivals, I noticed that children and youth learned to perform through observation followed by imitation. Children and adolescents practiced offstage, in backstage contexts, out of the view of critical adults, and only performed publicly when they felt confident they would perform correctly under others’ scrutiny. During a focus group discussion with boys, I asked how they learned to play the drum *fɔntɔmfrɔm*:

Yetie, wuhu. Saa ade no, *enye one day na wɔdebo fɔntɔmfrɔm*. Se yetie fɔntɔmfrɔm a, *enye one day anaasè in a minute pe na wɔbeyɛ na woagyaɛ.*

Wɔbeyɛ no *continuous*, enti wɔye no nyinaa na yetie. Yetie *how it goes*, te se yetie sɛne a sound no ba ara, na yen nso ye*follow*. Enti se mete se na wɔbo no see a, me*follow* saa ara, *pattern* no. *Next time*, se mekɔ [name of a place] na nkurofo nni ho a, me nso mekɔ*practici* se me nso metee sɛne a wɔbɔ no. Saa na mihuu bo. Saa na medesuaa sɛne a wɔbo akyene fa.

We listen, you see. That thing, they don’t drum *fɔntɔmfrɔm* on one day only. If we hear *fɔntɔmfrɔm*, they don’t just do it for a day or a minute and then stop. They do it continuously, so we listen all the time they are doing it. We listen to how it goes, like we listen to exactly how the sound goes, and we follow it. So if I hear that they are drumming it like that, I follow it exactly, the rhythm. Next
time, if I go [to a place] and no one is there, I practice the way I heard them drum.

That is how I saw how to drum. That is how I saw [learnt] how to play the drums. (taped discussion, 22 March 1999; translation by Afari Amoako, Kobina Ofosu-Donkoh, and me)

I wish I had started out learning to ask questions the way this young man learned to drum. Instead, I learned through experimentation, listening for success or failure, for questions or statements which allowed people to open up and others which created silences or other topics. Instead, only after repeated frustration, did I step back and observe how people learned.

**Conclusion: From Interviews to Observation**

I have argued that interviewing generated different kinds of speech genres and knowledge transmission than I expected. My frustrations with the interviewing process led me to observe and imitate interactions more closely, something Briggs advocating researchers should do before they begin asking questions. These struggles with the process helped me to see some things more clearly—the construction of knowledge, theories of learning, communicative strategies, and the importance of correct performance—which I came to see as central issues in the teaching of Ghanaian “culture” in the schools.

Interviewing, as is every conversation, is negotiated, not only in its form but also in its interpretation. Both respondent and interviewer are signaling and interpreting the context for the interview through their talk. However, in my case, my respondents and I had different theories of knowledge and ways of transmitting knowledge. Whereas I came with a sense of knowledge being accessible and public, free of power relations, people in Akuapem saw knowledge, especially cultural and historical knowledge, as secret and protected, intricately interwoven with
social status and power. I assumed that historical knowledge was based on personal experience, the standpoint or identity of my informant, whereas my key informants used life history as a marker of their age and expertise, but preferred to construct knowledge as reproducible (written), accurate, generalized, and descriptive, following the norms of school knowledge in Akuapem mixed with local notions of elders’ knowledge and history. Without understanding the guidelines for this transmission of knowledge, I sought to control it through my own criteria for interviews.

Knowledge is socially mediated, bound up in my position as American researcher and their positions as elders imparting knowledge. Our social positions and understandings of knowledge production and transmission influenced what we said to one another and how we said it. All knowledge is socially mediated, but these interviews at cross-purposes make this more visible. My growing knowledge of local strategies of learning simply allowed me to more smoothly elicit elders’ knowledge and to participate in that conversation as a respectful young person.

Thus, learning local conventions of knowledge transmission is essential to fieldwork. We need to understand the interpretive frames our questions and interviews elicit, as well as how our interests intersect with local notions of knowledge and expertise. In my case, in Akuapem, this meant learning how to find out, through experimentation, observation, and imitation.
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Bibliography


1. At the same time, there is attention being paid to bodily experience and embodiment as a route to knowledge (Young 1994, Sklar 1994).

2. The Guan may have arrived in the fifteenth century but, based on archaeological evidence, definitely by the end of the sixteenth century (Kwamena-Poh 1973).

3. My fluency in Twi increased over the course of the year. By the end, I was able to understand most sermons and primary and junior-secondary school lessons conducted in Twi and have everyday conversations with people. I had difficulty reading the more archaic and proverbial language of poetry, chiefly courts, and the Bible. Generally, as with most second-language learners with a grammar and dictionary, my reading and writing ability was greater than my speaking or hearing.

4. Dan Rose (1990) discusses the form of life of ethnographers as a cultural practice embedded in the rise of corporations.

5. A human subjects review at the University of Pennsylvania was not customary for anthropological research. I personally was concerned about consent and use of materials, and I did have informants sign an informed consent form, saying that I could use the information they provided in publications, for which they could choose to be named or anonymous. If they wished for changes to this form, I would make them.
6. In a discussion around consent, one informant told me not to use the information “raw” but to check with other people and documents to determine its truth.

7. This teaching strategy is to some extent a response to the lack of textbooks; when textbooks are pulled out of their closets, five or more students share one book, huddled around a table, reading upside-down, sideways, or over another’s shoulder.

8. For instance, one secondary-school teacher whose lessons I observed highlighted the difference between the celebration of funerals in his time and the present-day for his students. He was called “ɔpanyin” or elder. I am sure that this was not just for his age (in his sixties) but also because of his rhetorical style.

9. For “your time,” I used the Twi terms, “wo bere so” and “saa bere no.”

10. I was 27 years old at the time of these interviews, but people in Akuapem thought I was younger, in my early twenties.