

## Interviews and Adaptations: Inquiries into Cultural Production in Ghana<sup>i</sup>

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### Abstract

*A key issue in the collection of ethnographic data depends on an understanding of the methods that researchers employ to extract meaning from his or her experience in the field. While gathering and interpreting informants' meanings depends on careful participant observation, it is also contingent upon the researcher's ability to conduct interviews that adequately prompt individuals to describe their views of social life. This article examines some of the methodological concerns related to informal interviewing that arose during a period of ethnographic research conducted in Cape Coast, Ghana during the summer of 2006. The objective of the research project is to characterize the political economy of cultural production in Ghana through an investigation of one of the country's largest cultural festivals. Specifically, the article explores the process of questioning informants in the field and provides lessons on how to construct an effective set of inquiries compatible to one's objectives. Further, it presents excerpts from a series of informal interviews that highlight the plurality of responses that emerge from the same line of questioning.*

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## Introduction

The excerpts of fieldnotes that follow were gathered in the course of a two-month period of ethnographic research conducted in Cape Coast, Ghana that focused on an investigation of one of Ghana's largest cultural festivals, *Fetu Afahye*. Data collected during this period constitutes the base of primary research that informs my Master's Thesis, which explores the political economy of cultural production in Ghana. Specifically my research focuses on the role of corporate sponsors who have become involved in the festival's organization and production over time, and evaluates the current state of relations that exist between these new agents and the traditional leaders of Cape Coast. It also aims to identify the new forms of value that emerge from this relation and more broadly from the process of cultural commodification.

My research methodology consisted of an initial two-week period of archival research in Ghana's capital city, Accra, followed by a second phase of ethnographic research in Cape Coast that included participant observation and collection of oral histories, as well as structured and semi-structured interviews. Primary informants were selected from three sample populations consisting of traditional leaders, commercial sponsors, and festival participants. Five individuals situated in varying social and economic positions were selected from each sub-group in order to yield a diverse range of perspectives on the social and economic trajectory of the festival and the meanings associated with its contemporary expression. The voices presented in this paper are limited to the first sub-group in order to give the reader a sense of the plurality of responses that emerge from the same line of

questioning. As such, it brings a fundamental analytical problem into bold relief: how is the researcher to interpret the multiple and often contradictory "realities" that materialize in the process of questioning informants?

The selections of notations presented below are excerpts taken from a collection of five informal, semi-structured interviews with traditional leaders of varied political ranking. These individuals' responses are critical to an understanding of the political and economic relations that form the base of the cultural production of *Fetu Afahye*, as they function as key agents who play an active role in its construction and performance. The purpose of this series of interviews was to: 1) collect information regarding the social and economic trajectory of the festival; 2) illustrate traditional leaders' views regarding the presence of corporate sponsors; and 3) characterize the relationship between traditional leaders and corporate sponsors.

Preliminary findings suggest that the social and economic fabric of the festival has taken a new form due to what informants describe as a general devaluation of "traditional culture." In some cases respondents attribute this transformation to an increase in formal education or to a lack of cultural knowledge possessed by traditional leaders. Economic factors that have led individuals to seek work outside of the traditional modes of accumulation are also cited as having "changed the minds of people towards their indigenous festivals." The data reflects contradictory views regarding the presence of corporate sponsors. While some traditional leaders feel that the increasing role of corporate sponsorship has had no affect on the festival's intended function, others express disdain over the subsequent commodification of the cultural practices that constitute the event; as one informant notes,

"the festival's traditional value is being lost to these companies." The final objective that consisted of characterizing relations between sponsors and traditional leaders was fraught with similar contradictions. Some informants suggested relations were cordial, whilst others rendered them contemptuous. Although a systematic analysis of all primary and secondary data is yet to be completed, the data presented here suggests that the sphere of cultural production in Ghana is a contested terrain where struggles over the legitimate mode of cultural representation and the social production of value are at stake as diverse sets of agents with distinct aims compete for dominance within political and economic fields of power.

### **Lessons from the field**

Prior to entering the field I constructed a detailed questionnaire covering many of the issues I felt were necessary to address. However, after each interview I continued to rework my questionnaire, making adjustments for numerous reasons. The process of constructing an effective question set and the associated problems I encountered provide insight into the often challenging experience of conducting ethnographic interviews.

First, questions regarding sensitive issues may require careful wording or depend on the researcher's use of other questions to yield the desired response. However, the problem of "sensitivity" may not become evident until one has entered the field. After a short time at my own field site, I found that the collection and distribution of money used for the celebration of *Fetu Afahye*—one of my central interests—is a matter that is hotly contested

and had to be addressed in a roundabout way. Thus, I learned that other related inquiries such as "what does it involve for a chief to participate in *Fetu Afahye*?" or "how has the festival's funding changed over time?" were comparable and far more appropriate than an inquiry that directly questioned the respondents funding sources (i.e. "Are any funds given directly to chiefs?"). The former yielded the intended response but also precluded adverse reactions that could have damaged the quality of subsequent responses. (See interview 2a, response 1 for an illustration of an adverse reaction.)

Secondly, some questions had to be omitted because of limited interview time. Interviews were conducted during the period preceding the festival's celebration when targeted informants were largely absorbed by responsibilities related to its production. In many cases, respondents had limited time to meet and so I had to condense my question set considerably. I produced a second "bare bones" questionnaire (represented below) that highlighted only the essential questions critical to my objectives. I carried both sets of questions with me at all times and by doing so I was prepared to get the most out of situations in which time was restrictive.

Lastly, I found that it was useful to reevaluate the content and form of questions in reference to the responses it yielded after each interview. While the fundamental themes explored remained constant, questions were adapted, deleted, and rearranged after interviews in order to finally yield a chronology of stylized inquiries that best suited the objectives of my field of interest. In short, flexibility and close attention to the occasionally indirect relation between questions and responses enabled me to construct an effective questionnaire that rendered instructive data.

The following fieldnotes have not been edited or reworked, but are in the "raw" form in which they were recorded. Excerpts are presented from three selected interviews. The informality of these directed conversations precluded use of a tape recorder and allows the reader a sense of the shape that notes take under such conditions. Basic information is provided about each individual including his or her gender, age, and title. Responses were prompted by the following series of questions and are representative of the condensed form of a longer questionnaire:

1. What does it involve for a chief to participate in *Fetu Afahye*?
  - a. Does any allotment of funds support chiefs' participation? If so, how are they expended?
2. How was the festival funded prior to the inclusion of corporate sponsors?
  - a. Why did this shift occur?
3. When did the festival begin to accept the aid of corporate sponsors?
4. How has the presence of commercial sponsors affected *Fetu Afahye*?
  - a. What is your opinion of their presence?
5. Discuss the relationship between corporate sponsors and the traditional council.

### **Responses from traditional leaders of Cape Coast**

*August 11, 2006 Interview 2a.*

*Informant 2a: Male. 67 years old. Sub-chief.*

1. Chiefs' participation and funding:

*"It's very expensive for chiefs to participate. They need to buy a new cloth to wear, pay for a retinue to carry them*

*on palanquins, pay drummers, and buy more gold to wear."*

Following this response, I ask if any funds are directed towards chiefs to off-set their costs, informant 1a responds: *"Why would we want to tell you where we get our money? Why should we tell you anything? You may expose us! White people are earning a lot of money and they are exposing us! The head bosses may not be happy that other people are funding our participation in this festival and so it's important that we don't tell others. You should take care with whatever you write about us. If this information gets into the wrong hands it can damage our position."*

### 3. The Emergence of Sponsors:

*"Education has been a problem for us since our culture is not being passed down to younger generations. Our culture is being lost through books. Yes, children must go to school but they should not be deprived of our rich cultural traditions."*

Informant 2a regards formal education as the cause for the general trend whereby "people began to look down on our traditional work of farming and fishing" and thus were less attached to "traditional culture." This is why it became necessary for the sponsors to come in and provide chiefs with money to participate in the festival.

He goes on to further describe what he refers to as "culture loss": *"Today all the chiefs and Asafo members (traditional military organizations) are losing their culture. They have lost their culture because of colonial rule. They have all become 'gentlemen.' None have gone back to their roots. They are becoming white men. Whatever we do we'll never be white. The whites will never accept us."*

#### 4. Affects of Corporate Sponsorship:

*"The festival is not affected by commercial sponsors. Culture is in our house; they can't take that from us. It's just money that they provide. We need the money."*

I ask what his opinion is on the presence of the sponsors to which informant 2a responds: *"Those commercial sponsors shouldn't come in! But we need the money. They come and support us. Before it was based on the community and allegiance to our ancestors. People used to do it for free! But now they won't even waste the day in helping us."*

*August 25, 2006 Interview 4a.*

*Informant 4a: Male. 61 years old. Chief, highest rank.*

#### 2. Festival funding:

*"In the olden days the cost was minimal if at all. People made sure that the paramount chief didn't suffer."*

Before farmers and fisherman brought chiefs food and fish, and wealthy residents donated money and other things of value. Informant 4a notes that after the festival the chiefs would have even made a profit! It is not the same now, thus the need for sponsorship: *"The perception of people in the olden days has changed. The modern day attitude and economic factors, and the challenges of modern times have changed the minds of people towards their own indigenous festivals. They will come and enjoy themselves, but they will not want to contribute to the real thing."*

#### 4. The presence of commercial sponsors:

*"Until now, they haven't given us any problems or affected what is traditional. We wouldn't even give them a chance. You either come and participate accordingly or you do not come. This is not for sale!"*

5. Relations between sponsors and traditional leaders:

*"Sponsors help SELL the name of Cape Coast."*

Informant 4a notes that sponsors attract people from all over Ghana to participate in the festival. He says that the amount of money the sponsors make during the festival is probably the highest of any other Ghanaian festival. He says that because of this *"the company will be susceptible to the demands of the Cape Coast. If there is something going on and we approach them for their support, they will look at the benefit they have also derived from Cape Coast and oblige. The relationship is very cordial."*

I ask if the sponsors ever make demands of the traditional council, he replies: *"One of the requests we always receive from the sponsors is that we give them avenues for the publicity of their own products. Invariably it is given. Unless we feel like it will hamper something traditional. Otherwise there is not problem."*

*September 13, 2006 Interview 5a.*

*Informant 5a: Female. 62 years old. Queen Mother.*

4. The presence of commercial sponsors:

*"It's not right. Eventually the festivals importance and essence would be lost."*

For example, companies come in and say they are sponsoring the festival for 100 million cedis (~ USD 10,700), and they bring 10 crates of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. And then they add 20 million cedis (~ USD 2,000), which is distributed to the chiefs. *"So because of that, should we sell our birthright? Its like selling our birth right! It is not right. We are talking against slavery and the slave trade and its consequences for Africa and yet indirectly we are offering ourselves and our age-long traditions for a pittance, for money."*

Informant 5a mentions a workshop she attended with other traditional leaders and academics entitled "Culture and Integration among the West African Sub-regions" and adds: "*During that workshop we didn't take kindly to 'those things [commercialization]' because it is the companies products or brands that are in focus MORE than the festival.*" For example this year, Star Beer Company put up a huge sign in the festival meeting grounds that mentioned nothing about *Fetu Afahye*. She says she mentioned this to the paramount chief and that she needs to have a "serious" talk with the festival coordinator about "these things". She notes that there needs to be a forum about the presence of sponsors because "our tradition is being lost, the festival's traditional value is being lost to the companies."

5. Relations between sponsors and traditional leaders:

*"When we put up restrictions or set out guidelines, sponsors don't respect them. Sponsors don't respect the demands of the chiefs/planning committee."*

She says that companies feel that once they are sponsoring they can do whatever they want: "*Its time we [the traditional council] sat with them and went into a proper agreement as to what should be done. We need to tell them what is traditional and what is not traditional and what should not be done.*" According to her the main problem is that an onlooker would think that it is the Star Beer Company that is organizing its own event and inviting people to come, and that one wouldn't recognize that it's the annual festival of "the people."

Informant 5a links this problem to chiefs who lack cultural knowledge: "*Some of the chiefs themselves do not know certain things. They are not well informed about traditional protocol because they were not brought up in*

*the traditional setting. For example if you have just been installed as chief and you just don't know. They think that because we have no money we have no say."* She believes that the traditional council should engage in income generative activities immediately after each festival to raise money for the next year's celebration instead of relying so heavily upon the sponsors. She laments that *"here in Cape Coast, it looks like anything goes. It is the same old sponsors that are brought on board every year."*