ORAL TRADITIONS AND FALSIFIABILITY: EXPLORING AFRICAN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE REPOSITORIES

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Abstract: *Some scholars have expressed concern about the sustainability of relying on oral traditions for unpacking Africa's knowledge systems, values and history. The core of the concern, especially, from the perspective of advocates of quantitative methods, is the use of interviews in qualitative enquiries. This paper argues that careful qualitative enquiry of African cultural worldviews, beliefs and practices can benefit from the in-depth knowledge of individual and communal repositories without falsifications. There still exist truthful and dependable individuals knowledgeable in both exoteric and esoteric beliefs and philosophies of their cultures and societies who can be counted on for qualitative enquiries.*

Key Words: Falsification; Interviews; Knowledge repositories; Oral tradition; Qualitative enquiry.

Introduction

The gathering of factual data and presentation of reliable report are considered a challenge to research. Often, the crux of the challenge tends to centre on the approach to gathering data. In qualitative research where the use of interview is an important data collection type, the falsifiability of data or evidence is often traced to the researcher on the one hand, or the gatekeeper of knowledge repositories on the other. Some may point to a possible collusion between the researcher and the gatekeepers. The challenge is compounded, as in the African experience, where for centuries, history and evidence in oral traditions and interviews become often the main means to gather data. In this case, many factors affect the quality of data gathered through interviews with the gatekeepers of knowledge repositories.

Interviewing as a tool of research has different approaches and purposes. According to Michael Quinn Patton, generally, "We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. The issue is not whether observational data are more desirable, valid, or meaningful than self-report data. The fact is that we cannot observe

everything."[1] The use of interviews to explore the worlds of the participants, therefore, requires some skills to avoid falsification of evidence from data. The role of the interviewer becomes a central consideration in determining the authenticity of evidence gathered. Even, at the starting point, the interviewer or the researcher has the responsibility to ensure that evidence gathered is not falsified. This explains the assertion of Patton:

> I prefer to believe that there is a way to unlock the internal perspective of every interviewee. My challenge and responsibility as an interviewer involve finding the appropriate and effective interviewing style and question format for a particular respondent. It is my responsibility as the interviewer to establish an interview climate that facilitates open responses.[2]

This significant role of the researcher or interviewer is well-considered especially on the possibility of either the interviewer or gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge causing falsification in data. The focus of this paper is on examining falsification in qualitative data.

As a qualitative researcher, the designs for my studies often straddle phenomenology and case studies. Two key elements of qualitative enquiry are utilised: the engagement with the participants in their natural settings and the use of interview for the participants to present the reality from their own perspectives.[3] From personal experience, the interactions with discussants and persons sampled for interviews have provided the insight into the nature of knowledge repositories and the need to safeguard evidence obtained from fieldwork. The fieldwork was guided by information gathered from scholarly works on the subject-matter and particularly on Africa.[4] These scholarly works also influenced the sectioning of this paper.

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[1] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd Edition (London: Sage Publication, 2002), 340.

[2] Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 417.

[3] J.W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. (London: Sage Publication, 2009), 175; 178-182; P.D. Leedy and J.L. Ormod, *Practical Research: Planning and Design*, 11th Edition; Global Edition (Boston: Pearson Education International, 2015), 269-328.

[4] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); J.L. Cox, *Rational Ancestors: Scientific Rationality and African Indigenous Religions* (Cardiff: Cardiff Academy Press, 1998).

Apart from the introduction, the arguments of this paper are built in three main segments and with a conclusion. The first main segment analyses the challenge to sustainability of oral traditions in African indigenous societies. Next, the paper examines qualitative enquiry and the possible falsifiability of evidence from both the researcher and the participant's perspectives. The third segment suggests possible safeguards against falsification of evidence and finally presents a conclusion. The overarching objective of the paper is to examine safeguarding of evidence gathered through interviews in African indigenous societies from falsification and to conclude that qualitative interviews are still relevant for research.

This presentation is founded on findings from research conducted from 1998 to 2014 This was a phenomenological study of the Tongu Mafi people. Data was gathered from fieldwork through interviews and discussions with opinion leaders with in-depth knowledge about the beliefs, philosophy and practices of the Tongu Mafi people. In 2016, another fieldwork was carried out with a focus on data collection and possible falsification of evidence through interviews.[5] To this end, individuals knowledgeable in both exoteric and esoteric beliefs and philosophies of their cultures and societies were purposively sampled for interviews and discussions. In addition, views of scholars on African Religions and philosophy were sought for through interviews and discussions.

The experiences of these scholars, especially, on the challenges of using interviews and discussions to gather data added to the insight and knowledge of the dynamics about falsification of evidence through interviews. The personal experiences recounted by these scholars in their writings buttress findings obtained from fieldwork. Also, observations were made of the practices of the people. Related documents were reviewed. A cultural analysis of findings was employed. A cultural analysis of findings reveals that gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge

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[5] Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmeli: An Introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: Oxford Publications, 1965); Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Michael C. Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner: Contending Theologies of Christian and African Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987) and James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

repositories are capable of sustaining the sanctity of the knowledge they are safeguarding.[6] The foundation of this paper is therefore the analysis and interpretation of data gathered using qualitative data collection techniques from the Tongu Mafi traditional area in the Volta Region of Ghana. This is against the backdrop that there is possible falsification of evidence in qualitative data through interviews.

Literature and Conceptual Framework

Scholars have written from different perspectives and disciplines on research in Africa. The focus of this review is on philosophy and religion. There are scholars who have researched into the African experience to react to earlier researches on African philosophy and religion. The concern in this direction is to expose the weaknesses in the presentation of African religions and philosophy J.S. Mbiti wrote that "these earlier descriptions and studies of African religions left us with terms which are inadequate, derogatory and prejudicial."[7] Kofi Asare Opoku also observed that some writers presented Africa as a continent with inferior and dissimilar cultures to that of Europe: "they held that there could be no similarity between the religion of Europe and that of Africa; there had to be, of necessity, a difference. Hence arose the multifarious terms which were meant to emphasize the dissimilarity."[8] There are others he described as showing "appreciative understanding and sympathetic attitude to traditional African religion."

Apart from the challenge of the earlier writers, the 'insider' and 'outsider' debate on African studies and research gained prominence in the recent past. As to whether the researcher should be African or non-African cannot be described as a priority in contemporary research in Africa. David Westerlund observed that the 'inside' perspective, i.e., the self-understanding of the human beings studied, *their* conceptions of man and of reality, is of central interest. Others, however, may prefer to put the main emphasis on 'outside' perspectives. It should be remembered, also, that in a sense all scholars are 'outsiders.' "A complete 'inside view' can only be presented by the actual believers themselves, and a scholar striving to depict such a view as faithfully as possible entails

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[6] Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

[7] J.S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 7.

[8] Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Accra: REP Int. Private Ltd. 1978), 6.

certain methodical problems."[9] Scholars of both religion and philosophy have questioned methods of research and assertions about the African experience and the concern has often been the processes of acquiring quality evidence.[10] This then raises the question: how can evidence obtained through qualitative interview be safeguarded from falsification?

This current study contributes to knowledge about African experience by focusing on means of safeguarding evidence gathered through interview in African indigenous societies from falsification. A phenomenological analysis of views of discussants and interviewees reveals how evidence can be compromised after it has been transmitted to the researcher. The implication is for researchers to adopt acceptable methodologies as well as to ensure the sanctity of knowledge to be gathered through oral means such as interviews and discussions. The framework is the reflexive relationship between the researcher and the gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge repositories in Africa. The notion of reflexivity, in this context refers to "the ways in which the products of research are affected by the personnel and process of doing research."[11]

Challenges to the Sustainability of African Oral Traditions

The use of oral tradition in transmitting African indigenous knowledge, history and values among others over centuries has some concerns. The question has often been whether the oral narratives can capture the knowledge, history and events in their pristine forms? These concerns come in many forms. First, the argument has been raised long ago as whether the individuals or group of person who serve as the repositories for indigenous knowledge systems could form the chain to sustain the transmission of the knowledge.[12] The observation of these critics is that the human repositories are near-extinct if not completely extinct. Certainly, the death of a human repository of knowledge would mean the death of the knowledge he or she has religiously safeguarded if it had

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[9] David Westerlund, "'Insider' and 'Outside' in the Study of African Religions: Notes on Some Problems of Theory and Method," in *African Traditional Religion in Contemporary Society*, ed. J.K. Olupona (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 20-21.

[10] Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Cox, *Rational Ancestors*.

[11] C.A. Davies. *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others*, 2nd Edition (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2008).

[12] Rattray, *Ashanti*.

not been already transmitted to another person. Despite the claim of communal ownership of African indigenous knowledge, the gatekeepers are few and the outsiders' access to these gatekeepers is limited. This was the grave concern of Rattray on his enquiry into the culture of the Ashanti at the turn of the 19th Century. He observed that: "The material from which data can be obtained for this branch of anthropological study is disappearing so rapidly in Ashanti that it would be lost entirely within the next few years."[13] This observation by Rattray was about a century ago. However, it could not be claimed that in contemporary African societies, persons with knowledge in traditional philosophy and beliefs are extinct. The gatekeepers are there but one must be careful of claims that they are easy to locate.[14]

Findings from data gathered from the Tongu Mafi people shows that certain things the indigenous African considered mysteries are superstitious. As a result of modernity and scientific development, some beliefs and ritual practices are now being questioned. Among the Tongu Mafi people in the Volta Region of Ghana, for instance, yaws, locally called *dzabu*, was a dreaded disease and is considered abominable disease or sickness (*busudor*). Persons afflicted with this disease were segregated from mainstream communal life in the past.

One such settlement for these segregated persons is Dzabukpo in the present Central Tongu District of the Volta Region in Ghana. Persons afflicted with yaws, even after death, are not buried in the normal cemetery but at a different location that cannot be described as a cemetery and with special rituals. In fact, in Tongu Mafi people's soteriology, such people do not qualify to join the ancestors in the hereafter, and in Mafi people's metaphysics they do not attain salvation.[15] This disease has been eradicated through immunization and improved medical care. The traditionalists still believe that it was their attitude and rituals that had nipped the occurrence of the disease in the bud but to some others in the community this belief was superstitious. There are other instances in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa where these beliefs, worldviews and practices have been demystified and consequently abandoned or

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[13] Rattray, *Ashanti*, 8.
[14] Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*.
[15] Godson Ahortor, "Soteriology Beliefs and Ethical Values of the Tongu Mafi people" (Doctoral thesis; University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana, 2015), 83; Godson Ahortor, "Salvation and Morality: The Interconnections in African Thought," *European Scientific Journal* 12 (2016), 221.

modified. In cases of divided opinion, the possibility of falsification becomes real. There could also be the emergence of new narrative leading to more complexities in sustaining evidence, especially, from the oral sources.

There have been criticisms about some of the early literary works on Africa. These had often been writings of the early explorers, merchants and travellers across most of the African countries. They also include works of Christian theologians who sought to present African indigenous worldviews and practices. There is often the attempt to present African philosophies as subordinate to that of other philosophies of religions.[16] This has been the case from the research area and a reflection of the experience generally from Africa. For instance, some Christian theologians would not like to recognise the African belief in ancestors. Others have also tried to explain ancestral worship in Christian context.[17] The aim is to portray Jesus as the 'best' ancestor and reject the traditional conception of the ancestral cult. A renowned Ghanaian Christian theologian, Kwame Bediako made the following observation about the universal function of Jesus Christ and the ancestors in African culture:

> However, it is important to realize that since ancestors do not originate, in the first place, from the transcendent realm, it is the myth-making imagination of the community itself which sacralises them, conferring upon them the sacred authority which they exercise through those in the community, like chiefs, who also expect to become ancestors. … Once the meaning of the cult of the ancestors as myth is granted and its "function" is understood within the overall religious life of traditional society, then it begins to become clear how Jesus Christ fulfils our aspirations in relation to ancestral functions too. … Jesus Christ surpasses our natural ancestors also by virtue of who he is in himself. Ancestors, even described as "ancestral spirits", nonetheless remain essentially *human* spirits; whatever benefit they may be said to bestow upon their communities is therefore effectively contained by the fact of their being human. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, took on human nature without loss to his divine nature.

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[16] J.S. Mbiti. *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969); Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*.
[17] Kwame Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990); Joseph Osei-Bonsu, *The inculturation of Christianity in Africa: Antecedents and Guidelines from the New Testament and the Early Church* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2005).

> Belonging in the eternal realm – as Son of the Father (Hebrews 1:1, 48; 9:14) – he has nonetheless taken on human nature into himself (Hebrews 10:19) and so, as God-man, he ensures an infinitely more effective ministry to human beings (Hebrews 7:25) than can ever be said of merely *human* ancestral spirits.[18]

From the above excerpt, one can discern a type of attitude towards the making and shaping of philosophy by some scholars and theologians who expressed their views on the subject in Africa. Fundamental worldviews, beliefs and philosophy are described as "the myth-making imagination of the community." When these labelling gain root, they are then projected as alternate truths in literally circles and later imposed on the Africans. Generally, when scholars and theologians forcefully defend claims outside the practitioner or believer's point of view, it complicates the authenticity of the oral sources from indigenous repositories. Even if African philosophy and religious practices can be described as 'myth-making' by the 'outsider,' it should be stated that in the experience of the African, they are real. On the debate of whether myth denotes truth or falsehood, James Cox observed, with reference to Ninian Smart:

> An initial problem whenever the term "myth" is used as a classification of religious phenomena relates to the connotation of the term in general usage as that which is fictitious or untrue. … the term "myth" is neutral concerning the actual truth or falsehood of the story being told. What is important in order to achieve understanding of any community's myths is not whether they are true or false but to describe accurately "what is believed."[19]

In relation to the sustainability of oral traditions, the mere labelling of sources as myths should then not be a hindrance to knowing what the participants believe and practice for these are borne out of their philosophy and worldview.

In addition, there can be two broad categories of Africans who themselves would not accept some of their history and values. Some educated elites are gradually dissociating themselves from their traditional values and in some cases severing ties with their traditional homeland

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[18] Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture*, 39-41.
[19] Cox, *Rational Ancestors*, 35; Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind* (Glasgow: Collins Fount Paperbacks, 1984).

where the indigenous beliefs and values are well-rooted. They are often located in the urban and metropolitan parts of the country. While some of these Africans would occasionally visit their homelands, especially on festive occasions, others totally abandon their homelands and would not even like to be identified with that part of the country. For this kind of persons who have alienated themselves from their people, land, culture and practice, oral traditions and their history should be reconstructed. In spite of these unfortunate occurrences, their history can still be situated in the oral traditions of the very indigenous community they have alienated themselves from. For one thing, oral history will not fail to recount how aggrieved persons alienated themselves to form new communities. A careful investigation could however isolate the original worldviews and philosophy even in the case of parallel accounts and reduce to the barest minimum the falsification of evidence in data collection.

The second category would like to align their lifestyles with Western philosophies and practices. In the end, they abandon the indigenous sources and justify the Western worldviews. Perhaps the dangerous aspect of this category of Africans is their attempt to present their newly found practices and philosophies as the real position of Africa. This sits well with them also because foreign cultures and practices have gained grounds in the traditional society. Their rejection of their original culture, religion, language, music and lifestyles among others makes some of them alienate totally from their homeland. As they look down on African philosophy and culture, they attempt to replace them with the adopted ones. This affects the sustainability of oral traditions in accordance with original worldviews.

Attempts are already being made to reconstruct the philosophical and religious worldviews to resonate with the newly adopted lifestyles of these Africans. This partly accounts for the undifferentiated attacks on custom, rituals, tradition and generally the African indigenous ways of life. It then becomes comfortable for such persons to dispute oral sources of information in the traditional set-up.

Christian beliefs and practices are quite pervasive in the North Tongu District, and on the surface, it would appear these Christian values have dominated the moral beliefs of the Mafi people. Magesa pointed out that "Christian notions of morality and ethics in academic studies have so overshadowed ethical notions of African Religion that the latter have

almost always come to be seen exclusively in the light of the former. The result has been the intellectual suppression of the ethical points of view of African Religion in academic circles in many geographical areas of the continent where Christianity has succeeded in gaining large numbers of converts."[20]

A critical examination however reveals the resilience of traditional moral values and practices in Mafi in spite of the over-a-century period of religious and cultural encounters with Christianity. It is also observed that in some communities in Mafi there are indigenous beliefs, practices and values upheld even in a near-pristine form, in some places especially the urbanised places, some people are most comfortable with Christian beliefs and practices while some Mafi people blend both traditional and Christian values. In this case, multiple versions of oral tradition can be generated from the society. This could create the impression that authentic information to be gathered through oral sources cannot be possible. To avoid falsification of evidence, the researcher should be careful with the choice or selection of participants for interviews and discussions. The participants should be identified as persons who could keep to the original indigenous views of his or her community.

In all these, there have been writers who are regarded as good researchers on the African experience including some of the early writers. Asare Opoku has described these as "works which have shown an appreciative understanding and sympathetic attitude to traditional African religion."[21] The variety of attitudes towards writers on African experience also points to the mixed feelings on means of extracting information from the indigenous repositories. This also affects qualitative enquiries and methods for gathering data in African indigenous societies.

Qualitative Enquiry and Falsifiability of Evidence

Qualitative enquiry, as defined by Creswell, is

> a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from

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[20] Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 5.
[21] Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, 6.

particular to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data.[22]

As an approach for understanding human problems at the settings and point of view of the participants, qualitative enquiries emphasise the use of open-ended questions in the form of interviews besides observation and documents as data collection tools. The definition and strategies for data collection altogether strengthen the philosophical foundation of the humanities. One of the challenges to the use of interview during field works is the quality of claims attributed to researchers. The concern or question is whether qualitative researcher's use of interviews facilitates falsification of evidence?

A careful analysis shows that the researcher and the participant being interviewed could be the possible source of falsification of evidence. This often involves misconceptions and misinterpretation. Gyekye noted:

> The possibility of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is real; the possibility of wrongly attributing views is always there. One may undertake interviews and discussions with living traditional wise people in an attempt to overcome this difficulty but one can never be sure that the conceptions or interpretations of the traditional elders are themselves not coloured by ideas and doctrines of Christianity or Islam with which some of them are acquainted.[23]

Findings from my fieldwork on the Mafi people show that there is still the tendency of a participant or a practitioner straying to recount foreign narratives as part of the indigenous ones. During my fieldwork, some discussants were asked to explain the origin of humans from the perspective of the Tongu Mafi people's narratives on creation. They started with the story of Adam and Eve which is apparently a biblical narrative. However, further probing made one of them recount the general narrative of the Ewe people. This supports Gyekye's assertion of external religious influence on indigenous philosophy and religions.

In qualitative enquiry, these setbacks are regulated through different means such as the identification of participants who are knowledgeable in their culture, history and philosophy; and at the same time could

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[22] Creswell, *Research Design*, 4.
[23] Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 51-52.

articulate them. In addition, a fundamental distinction should be made between dynamics in practices and worldviews; whereas core indigenous worldviews are quite resilient, the cultural practices that manifest them are dynamic. A study of the cultural practices should therefore be done in line with the worldviews and philosophies that buttress them. This will cater for the possibilities of misconceptions and misinterpretations.

Findings show how some discussants explained some worlds based on the context of Christian understanding and translation of them in the Ewe Bible. Discussants expressed divergent view on some basic Ewe words and findings show that the divergence is based on theological lines Two of these words are *Mawu* for God or the Supreme Being and *Tsiefe* as a term for the hereafter in the metaphysics of the Tongu Mafi people.

On the concept of God, while the discussants with Christian background have a plural form for *Mawu* as *Mawuwo* and therefore undifferentiating between God and the gods, the traditionalist among the discussants, on the other hand, maintained that *Mawu* has no plural form. They argued that there is a clear distinction between *Mawu* as God or the Supreme Being and the *trowo* or the gods. They therefor recognize the unity of *Mawu* as the Supreme Being. Also, the discussants with Christian background acknowledge the term *Tsiefe* but denied the detailed metaphysical explanations of the traditionalists .The traditionalists believe that *Tsiefe* is a spirit world where the souls of deceased persons live and live life except that they are in a different state or in spirit form. One traditionalist concluded that the Christian views on these words are not true of Mafi traditional worldviews and a form of falsification.

It was also revealed from findings that some researchers who had interviewed some opinion leaders in the Mafi community attempted giving scientific justifications for some of the claims of participants. These controversies often centre on issues of health and wellbeing. Earlier, the controversies about the eradication of yaws had been explained. One discussant, a *Yewe* priest in the Mafi community, in addition explained that some researchers who in some time past had discussions with him made claims which believed could not have been made by a *Yewe* priest as they maintained. The priest maintained that there can be eradication of diseases and total healing without the intervention of scientific or Western forms of medicare. According to him, those who had the

discussion with him thought otherwise and sourced other *Yewe* priests. He cited his personal experience of healing from a broken leg and arm as an example.[24] He felt there might be falsification of information obtained from the other *Yewe* priests.

Safeguarding against Falsification of Evidence from Oral Repositories

Great scholarly works on Africa have often been based on qualitative enquiries and from the testimonies of these great scholars they tapped into the rich oral repositories of the participants. They carefully and painstakingly located the right and appropriate gatekeepers of knowledge repositories for their qualitative enquiries. These include among others Kwame Gyekye, R. S. Rattray, James Cox, Michael Kirwen and Marcel Griaule.[25] The kind of people they interviewed and had discussions with for their qualitative data were the class of people the society recognises as knowledgeable and true repositories of their values, history and traditions. These scholars and their works then point to the fact the use of interviews and discussions to gather data was not the challenge *per se* but the possible falsification of the data gathered from fieldwork.

Considering the nature of the challenge of gathering qualitative data through interviews and discussions from the field, appropriate measures could be taken to reduce doubts about the authenticity of the evidence. Different scholars may take different strategies but in broad terms, the success of any measure against falsification would largely depend on the researcher. The foremost of these measures lies in the researcher's understanding of the task he or she has taken upon himself or herself. What is gradually becoming a major challenge in academic institutions is the impression of some students that research is just a part and parcel of a programme leading to academic qualification. In some cases, assistance is sought or 'bought' from others who are often unqualified for research purposes. The researcher then becomes an armchair scholar,

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[24] *Yewe* is a religious cult of thunder and lightning. The discussant is Togbe Sefahu Midawa Zutunu, an eminent *Yewe* Priest from Mafi Tsati.

[25] Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*; Rattray, *Ashanti*; Cox, *Rational Ancestors*; Kirwen, *The Missionary and the Diviner*; Marcel Griaule, *Conversations with Ogotemmeli: An introduction to Dogon Religious Ideas* (London: Oxford Publications, 1965).

using academically dishonest means to carry out his or her research with the aim of receiving a targeted academic qualification.

From this point of view, the use of interviews and discussions could be seriously flawed and in the end the evidence is falsified. The solution to this aspect of the challenge is self-examination. The researcher must necessarily consider the kind of programme he or she has chosen and assess whether he or she is up to the task of the research component of the programme. Self-examination also has to do with morality; the researcher should reflect on the requirement of intellectual honesty in academic work. Falsification of evidence on the part of the researcher certainly is dishonesty. This self-examination should be understood within the context of reflexivity. This should span the 'before, during and after' of the research.[26] The researcher must recognize that different factors can affect accounts of respondents and this realization is important in qualitative research.[27]

The second means is the understanding of the relevance of the research one is about to carry out. The focus can be shifted to the gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge repositories and the society they represent in general. Qualitative enquiry will demand that the researcher treats with respect and value the information being sought for from the participant. This engenders maximum co-operation. In his encounters with the Asantes almost a century ago, Rattray recapped this experience with his informants:

> I approached these old people and this difficult subject (their religious beliefs) in the spirit of one who came to them as a seeker after truth, the key to which I told them they alone possess, which not all the learning nor all the books of the white man could ever give to them.[28]

Rattray believed that these respect and assurances guaranteed a fruitful co-operation between him as a researcher and the gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge. It is also a common knowledge that gatekeepers or

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[26] J.M. Roberts and T. Sanders, "Before, during and after: Realism, Reflexivity and Ethnography," *The Sociological Review* 53 (2005), 294-313.

[27] N.S. Mauthner and A. Doucet, "Reflexive Accounts and Accounts of Reflexivity in Qualitative Data Analysis," *Sociology* 37, no. 3 (2003), 413-431.

[28] Rattray, *Ashanti*, 11.

participants may be reluctant to provide vital information if they have the suspicion that the researcher could not be trusted.

The notion that indigenous knowledge repositories can be described as communally owned does not negate individual gatekeepers of these repositories. The selection of participants for interviews and discussions then should be purposively done in order to capture individuals with in-depth knowledge of the society and their philosophies. Despite the influence of modernity and foreign religions, particularly, Christianity and Islam, it is possible to locate traditional thinkers with the knowledge to give information on behalf of their societies. Gyekye stressed this view:

> Regarding the difficulty of getting at indigenous ideas in the light of Africa's historical contact with Christianity and Islam, I wish to say that in Akan, as indeed in every African community, there are certain individuals who are steeped in the traditional lore. These individuals are regarded as wise persons in their own right. They stand out in their own communities and command the respect and esteem of their own townsfolk. A researcher who goes to any Akan town or village would invariably be directed to such individuals; they are generally tradition-bound in their intellectual and general outlooks. Some of them have had no formal education at all; others have had some formal (Western) education, mostly through elementary school. While some may be Christians or churchgoers and so have some acquaintance with Christianity, all of them, in discussions, are able intellectually to distinguish between traditional conceptions and those of Christianity and of Islam as well, although its influence in Akan land has been marginal.[29]

The researchers should also guard against underrating the intelligence of the person they are going to interview or have discussions with on the field. Even if it is not consciously done, practitioners can discern attitudes and questions that are crafted to test their intelligence. To the participants, any such attitudes may be tantamount to disrespect. Michael Quinn Patton advised researchers going in for interview:

> You must yourself believe that the people being interviewed are worth knowing. In short, you must have the utmost respect for these persons

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[29] Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought*, 53.

who are willing to share with you some of their time to help you understand their world.[30]

The underrating of intelligence may come in different forms but one of the commonest is the attempt of the interviewer to pose questions aimed at assessing the depth of knowledge of the participant or the interviewee. This will usually affect the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Patton noted that if an interviewer asks "simple and meaningless questions" the respondent or interviewee will answer him or her with "simple and meaningless answers."[31] The researcher should guard against these tendencies.

Often, the researcher engages with the participants in qualitative enquiry. The informants who could be described as discussants guide the researcher into the world of the participants. The role of these informants becomes very important if the researcher happens to be an 'outsider' to the research area. Experienced researchers tend to be very careful with their choice of informants. There is the possibility of an informant presenting his or her personal view as that of the participants. To avoid falsification of evidence on the part of informants, researchers should carefully assess the qualities of their informants. James Clifford wrote on Marcel Griaule's observation of his informants:

> The informant must first be carefully identified and located in a specific group or set of groups within the social fabric. In this way one can allow for exaggerations and for omissions related to group loyalty, taboos, and so on. … His "moral qualities" are to be assessed: sincerity, good faith, memory.

Every informant, Griaule assumes, enunciates a different kind of truth, and the ethnographer must be constantly alive to its limitations, strengths, and weaknesses. "… he [Griaule] discusses various types of 'liars.' … Native collaborators 'lie' in jest or through venality, the desire to please, or the fear of neighbours and the gods … Forgetful informants and Europeanized informants are particularly dangerous types of liars."[32]

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[30] Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 417.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 73.

The choice and qualities of the informant must then be properly assessed to help minimize the possibility of falsification of evidence through interviews or discussions. In spite of the 'outside' cultural and religious influences on African traditional societies, there can still be found trustworthy gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge systems. In qualitative research there is room for validating data. Triangulation is one form. Triangulation thrives on the use of multiple sources of data collection. In qualitative research, the researcher could, for instance, validate findings through a combination of informal observation and in-depth interviews.[33]

In recent times, technology is so much advanced that it is being used in different ways to the advantage of the human society. To this end, technology can be deployed to safeguard information on African knowledge systems. This will include audio and visual recording of interviews and discussions, events and ceremonies, as well as the environment. In this case, technology could be used as a tool for present researchers to visit or engage the past; African indigenous knowledge gatekeepers could also depend on this technologically preserved data. The overarching objective of the use of technology to store data or evidence is to provide a reliable storage platform for the future and a protection against the falsification of such data.

The use of technology has its own challenges. In this case, the use of technology to store vital oral data can generate controversies. The most foreseeable is the challenge of ownership of intellectual property. Often, this occurs in situations where the information gathered by the researcher could be used to generate income. An example can be given of gatekeepers of indigenous repositories on traditional medicine and healing. Practitioners in this sector are often unwilling to co-operate with researchers and their counterparts in scientific medicine partly because of the fear that their knowledge would be tapped for the advantage of their counterparts. Therefore, the question of ownership of intellectual property becomes a wedge between researchers and gatekeepers of knowledge. Any of the parties wishing to take advantage could falsify evidence from data.

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[33] Leedy and Ormod, *Practical Research*, 104; Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd Edition (London: Sage Publishers, 2002), 247-249.

Considering the impact of external factors on indigenous ways of life, attempts could be made to encourage a revival of African cultural values. This has started in many circles already. Apart from the revisit to the vernacular even in higher institutions of learning in Ghana, there is the promotion of the use of African languages in the diaspora. An example can also be given of the proliferation of local language speaking radio stations in Ghana since the liberalisation of the airwaves since the 1990s; the use of the vernacular to entertain and educate the populace often on traditional cultural values and philosophy. The cultural revival and innovations in African Traditional Religion are remarkable. These should be pointers to the dynamism in African religious and cultural practices and the need to engage with the past in order to situate practices and worldviews in their proper context. If the past, history and claims are well-interrogated, there will be minimal falsification of evidence.

Conclusion

This presentation examined the possibilities of falsifiability of evidence against the backdrop of oral tradition repositories of indigenous knowledge. The concern had been the sustainability of the use of interviews for qualitative research in the face of seemingly disappearing of the gatekeepers of indigenous knowledge, on the one hand, and the gradual but persistent dissociation of present generation from traditional practices and culture. The findings from this research reveal that in spite of the challenge, qualitative enquiry remains an appropriate approach for unpacking the history, mysteries and realities of indigenous African values and knowledge. It then becomes imperative for researchers to safeguard against possibilities of falsification of evidence gathered through qualitative interviews.

The responsibility of safeguarding the evidence lies very much on the shoulders of the researcher. The researcher should search diligently for the right gatekeepers of repositories of knowledge for the interview, get to the world of the participant as required of qualitative enquiry and treat the participants and information gathered with respect. The nature and sources of data in the African experience call for qualitative strategies for research. It is in this sense that the humanities should guard against the use of quantitative statistics and probabilities to probe the values, realities and knowledge in the indigenous African societies.

Qualitative interviews remain an important tool of enquiry and that one can safeguard against falsification of evidence.

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