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Narrative Poetics and Performative Interventions

In: Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies

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Pub. Date: 2014

Access Date: February 3, 2020

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781412918039

Online ISBN: 9781483385686

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483385686>

Print pages: 391-406

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Narrative Poetics and Performative Interventions

D. SoyiniMadison

Practice without thought is blind; thought without practice is empty.

—Kwame Nkrumah (1998)

One day in my performance ethnography graduate seminar, a student who was frequently absent and not keeping up with the course readings was becoming more and more frustrated with the critical and theoretical aspects of the course. He did not approve of my approach to include critical and political theory in a course he felt should focus exclusively on performance “methods.” Toward the end of one session, he looked around at all of us sitting in the seminar circle and said, “With all this emphasis on theory and politics, you are not really interested in what people are actually doing in your fieldwork; but, instead, you are telling people what to do!” My blood was boiling at the accusation that all that was said, read, done, and discussed in the seminar up to this point was so blatantly diminished to “telling people what to do!” Although the young man was often absent and not keeping up with the rest of the class, I had to take his complaint seriously. Perhaps he was not doing well in the class because there was some truth to his accusation, and I was overemphasizing theory and politics at the expense of sound methodological practice. The student's comment was also difficult to understand, because it has always been impossible for me to separate theory from method. How can there be such a thing as *critical methods* without critical theory or politics and political theory? Can't we embrace theory and politics in the field and work for social justice—out of which our methods are generated—without being accused of “telling people what to do”?

A few weeks before the unhappy student's remark, I was attending a presentation on campus by two Afro-Peruvian women who were human rights activists in Peru. Their talk was inspiring and informative. One of the points they made that will always stay with me concerned the motives of fieldwork research. They said it is a problem and waste of time when academics come to Peru to engage in what they called “folklore” encounters. They went on to explain that rights violations and structures of racial oppression and poverty have affected their communities for generations, but academics will come and want to know about “beads, songs, myths, and weaving without associating them to the material conditions of our lives.” According to these activists, some of us seem to care more about “crafts and customs while ignoring the injustices that pervade the day to day.” The women were concerned that the “apolitical” approach that extricates the dirty details of political life for “weaving and myths” was another form of “romanticizing the native” while whitewashing the urgent realities of oppressive forces. I left the presentation of the Peruvian activists even more determined to teach and write in ways that recognize the importance of theories that inform a critical approach to methodology—a critical approach that is guided by political theory that matters on the ground, but at the same time believing in the power and beauty of cultural expression.

After the student made the comment in class, I thought about the Peruvian activists. The student equated

a critical theory approach to methodology as “telling people what to do;” the Peruvian activists equated a lack of political and critical consciousness in the field as “folklore encounters” that ignored material suffering. What critical, performance ethnography hopes to bridge is the frustration and feelings of lack in both these positions: the poetics of a space AND its politics as well as its politics and its poetics. Haven't we learned by now that expressive and cultural traditions always occur within the machinations of power that encompass them?

Critical performance ethnography is animated by the dynamics interacting between power, politics, and poetics (Alexander, 2006; Conquergood, 2002; Denzin, 2003; Hamera, 2007; Pollock, 2005). This chapter examines these dynamics within the oral narrative performances of local human rights activists in Ghana, West Africa, who are working for the rights of women and girls against traditional cultural practices that impede their freedom and well-being. For several years now, I have been conducting field research with Ghanaian activists working in rural areas who are involved in remarkable and courageous initiatives for the defense of human rights, particularly as it relates to women and girls. The activists in this chapter are concerned with a specific cultural practice known as Trokosi by most rights activists and Troxovi by most adherents of traditional African religion. the Troxovi/Trokosi practice involves a young girl, usually between ages 6 and 12, depending on the location, which is assigned to a village shrine. This can be for a certain period of years or for the duration of her life; again, this depends on the area where the shrine is located. In some areas, the Fiashidi/Trokosi are sent to the shrine in atonement for a crime or transgression that is said to be against God and the community. The crime is committed by a family relation, usually a male, and can range from a variety of transgressions such as an insult, stealing, or an act of violence. To appease the wrath and punishment of God against the family or village for the moral transgression, the virgin girl of the family is sent as reparation for the “crime.” In certain shrines, the abuse involves “slave labor” and often becoming “concubines” for the shrine's priests. However, these shrines, according to many traditionalists, are not genuine Trokosi shrines. It is said that these shrines are actually violating the principles of the religion and are considered “breakaway or outlaw” shrines. In the other areas that traditionalists regard as genuine Troxovi/Trokosi shrines, the women and girls attend the shrines for “moral and cultural training,” serving as “protection” or “proper moral teaching” from a family that has violated the moral codes of the community and religion. In these shrines, the traditionalists state that the girls have freedom of movement and may live at home; moreover, it is against the laws of the religion for the priests to sexually abuse them. Instead, they must to be treated respectfully.

Since I began my research, the Troxovi/Trokosi institution¹ has undergone many changes and transformations. Some traditionalists and rights activists have joined together in a campaign to reform the institution and eradicate those shrines and shrine priests in areas that were committing human rights violations. Some of these shrines remain for religious worship, but in several cases, the girls and women are no longer being sequestered or abused. However, there are some areas where Trokosi girls and women are still being violated and “breakaway” shrines are practicing “underground.”

This chapter presents the oral narratives of rights activists who are working against these “breakaway” or

“outlaw” shrines. I hope the chapter will serve as a bridge and opportunity for readers to listen to “indigenous” activists telling us (and each other) what *they do*. The chapter operates from a polemic of social justice relative to human rights, but the intention is to use this chapter as a platform and a means to forefront the polemic of those Ghanaians *themselves* who are fighting for the future of their own country, critiquing their own traditions, defending human rights from their own tactics and strategies, and desiring that others hear what they say and be exposed to what they do. I am claiming the “native point of view,” but I would be committing the same crime of false objectivity as those researchers who do not take responsibility for their biases, who refuse to recognize their inherent subjectivity and their ingrained power over the data (a power that always trails the ethnographic project), if I did not state in the beginning my admiration, support, and bias toward these rights activists and their work.

These narratives serve as examples of critical performance ethnography because the narrators poetically narrate their own indigenous and critical methodologies based on the politics of their performative interventions in defending the human rights of Others. As a critical performance ethnographer, I am “being there” within the time and space of others who guide, advise, and inspire me to further embrace performance (in different and contextually specific ways) as a means to interpret, illuminate, and advocate a politics of change. I interpret the in-depth interview with each rights activist through a performance lens to capture the complexity and multilayered dimensions reflected in the expressiveness of the human voice and body in the act of telling as well as the immediate environment or scene—ripe with influence and meaning—of the telling. In this sense, poetic transcription aims to capture the signification of what Richard Bauman (1977) calls the narrative event and the narrated event or what Della Pollock (1999) calls the telling and the told. Poetic transcription aims to capture the content of *what* is said and the form of *how* it is said in gesture, movement, vocal affect, and the symbolic surrounding reported and expressed.

The chapter will present two oral narratives by members of International Need Network, Ghana. International Needs Ghana (ING)² is a human rights organization that has been at the forefront of reforming the Troxovi/Trokosi institution and releasing or “liberating” girls and women from certain shrines. The first narrative by Patience Vormawor describes the tactics employed by ING in the liberation of Fiashidi/Trokosi from the religious shrines that inhibit their freedom. The second narrative by Agnes Okudzeto describes the ING school for liberated Troxovi/Trokosi that is prompted by a response to a charge made by a particular traditionalist who opposes the work of ING.

Throughout the narratives, I weave my own commentary and observations to illuminate the *implications* of their words and experience. There has been general and legitimate criticism far and wide of this “weaving” approach of “researcher” and “Other” by numerous observers and practitioners of qualitative research (including myself on occasion). In summary, the criticisms argue the following:

- The researcher's analysis is an intrusion where the subject's narrative is often *silenced*. The authoritative voice and heavy hand of the researcher overshadow the voice and presence of the narrator. The researcher's analysis “upstages” the narrative, leaving the narrator's actual words

almost forgotten and their meanings but whispers in the booming volume of the researcher's interpretation.

- The researcher's analysis is his or her own idiosyncratic interpretation and *distorts* the interpretative report and expressions of the narrator. The researcher does not necessarily silence the narrative but rather imposes a reversal or counterdirectional meaning to the directions and implications of meanings that constitute the narrative. Keep in mind, the researcher's interpretation does not deepen narrative analysis here or open possibilities of meanings but actually closes them by “twisting” and “distorting” the paths of truths that define the narrative and bring it into existence. The “falseness” of the researcher's interpretation betrays the promise of illumination and self-reflexive engagement.
- The researcher's analysis promotes theoretical jargon that renders the narrative analysis itself *ineffectual* at best and silly at worst. The researcher becomes so enamored with “theoretical speak” and impressing colleagues that honoring the narrative becomes less important than acrobatics of abstraction and theoretical word play. The researcher's analysis does not necessarily silence or distort the narrative; it just becomes undesirable to it. It becomes an alien indecipherable object alongside the vitality of a narrative still open for honest interpretation.
- The researcher's analysis is descriptive analysis that is only a simple restatement, a *redundant* summary that becomes an obtuse repetition of what is already apparent and more powerfully articulated in the words of the narrator. Here, the narrative is narrated again, but only second hand, by the researcher in the absence of new insights and possibilities of meaning. Analysis becomes useless repetition.

Although I often agree with these criticisms, I also believe a delicate balance of analysis can open deeper engagement with the narrative text and unravel contexts and connections within the undercurrents of the narrative universe, without the researcher acting as a psychoanalyst, clairvoyant, or prophet. What I hope to accomplish by including commentary is to attend to the narration—as one is compelled to attend to or interpret the significance of any object or text rich with meanings, history, value, and possibility—by entering selected moments of subtext and implicit moments of signification so that we may engage the depth of inferences, the overreaching consequences, and the politically valuable import in order that we as readers may be offered an *additional realization of the narrative and the narrator*. In summary, the aim is as follows:

- The researcher's analysis serves as a *magnifying lens* to enlarge and amplify the small details and the taken-for-granted. Too often hidden in plain sight of words spoken and written are meanings and implications below the surface that need to be excavated, contemplated, and engaged. We may listen to a story or point of view, and on first impression, it may come across as nothing special or uneventful. The researcher points to those moments or small details that we might take for granted as “ordinary talk” or prosaic and opens us to layers of complexity and associations that we may otherwise not come to realize.
- The researcher's analysis serves to *clarify and honor the significance* of the “telling and the told” (Pollock, 1990).
- This point is particularly important for performance ethnography. The interview is more than just

questions and answers that simply happen to occur in an innocuous location. It is a substantive event—a surrounding scene of signification and its objects—a gestalt where the immediate telling becomes a richly descriptive environment of symbolic worth. And where the immediacy of the telling environment frames and relates to its content or is told. Now, the interview becomes an eventful enactment of witnessing, testimony, and dialogue constituted by a form (i.e., engaged, meaningful bodies and a scenic space that are no longer ignored by *what* is said as content or a priori information).

- The researcher's analysis serves to employ theory in order to *unlock the multiple truths* embedded below the surface. Theory serves as a bright light out of which we can now see with fullness and precision what has always been present and in our midst but before was obscure and more difficult to name and reach. Theory must be quintessentially revelatory. It should not block our access to the narrative but lead us deeper into its paths or truths. Instead of theory becoming its own narrative (in interpreting the narratives of Others), theory reveals how we may encounter, describe, and name the narrative's essential insights. Without theoretical analysis, the power, complexity, and expanse of narrative knowledge become unengaged.
- The researcher's analysis serves to emphasize, reiterate, and *make apparent the beauty and poignancy* of description. As narrators describe certain persons, places, things, and ideas, the researcher may feel compelled to then describe the description. Instead of relying entirely on theory or more cognitive analysis, the researcher now embraces the emotions and sensuality of *what* is being described and *how* it is being described—the telling and the told—to illuminate the textures, smells, sounds, tastes, and sights being rendered within the content of the told and within the form of the telling. Performance ethnography demands a felt-sensing experience—emotions and sensuality—that employs lyrical, poetic, or performative language to wisely embellish the existential gestalt of the interview event, making it more present before us, with heart and beauty.

I bullet point what I believe to be the labor of analysis, not to claim a kind of authority for the researcher but to acknowledge the great importance of narrators and their narratives in our fieldwork.

The subaltern does speak, always, and we must listen with more radical intent. These subaltern knowledges are sometimes hidden away in locations that are at times hard for us to reach as they speak the philosophies, logics, and approaches of their life worlds and in their own languages. How indigenous people in this global/local dance and struggle often make a way out of no way—creating tactics for survival and victories out of the vestiges of an extremely unjust state of affairs—is why we call upon our local advisers in the field to help us try to comprehend. We listen so we can be of use to them—a messenger and an interpreter to make what they say and do known to other Others.

Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) states that within the narratives of African women writers, “theory is embedded in the polysemous and polymorphous” nature of the narration. I contend that this is also true of the oral narratives that inform and enrich our fieldwork. She goes on to state that narratives “re-inscribe and foreground teleological, ontological, and epistemological insights and praxis relevant to the specific

histories and politics that preceded” them (p. 20). For Nfah-Abbenyi, these narratives as theory (or theories as narratives) are not only “preceded” by history and politics but show us that “indigenous theory is autonomous, self-defining, and exists in unconventional places ... such theory can qualify as a kind of performance in print” (p. 20).

I: “We Are Not Outsiders”

Local Narrations of Rights and Critical Methodologies

It is a September morning in 1999, during the early stages of my fieldwork, and I am at the office of the ING, the nongovernmental organization (NGO) that has taken the lead in reforming the Troxovi/Trokosi institution. ING is located in the Scripture Union office building in Accra. As I come to the second floor of the building, I meet the director, Reverend Walter Pimpong. He greets me with a big smile; he has a calming and warm presence. I tell Walter I have come to interview Patience. He is pleased and suggests we conduct the interview in his private office where we will have more privacy. I am looking forward to this time with Patience, because when we are together in the field, she has no time to talk about herself or discuss personal reflections of her work. She is too busy focusing her attention on the people who need her help—listening, talking, and doing what needs to be done. I have watched her time and again in various villages of the Volta region interact with people with respect and affectionate attention, as if nothing in the world was more important to her than them and what they say to her. Patience has been one of the activists working very closely with the community as well as the shrine owners and priests in liberating several Trokosi women and girls from the shrines.

The room is air-conditioned and a nice relief from the suffocating December heat in Ghana. There is a large desk in the front of the room. On the wall is a poster with the picture of a young Trokosi girl wearing brightly colored African fabric; both her hands are placed on the top of her head to signify mourning or suffering. Written across the poster in red and white letters are “Stop Trokosi Now!” and beneath it “... respect the rights of girls and women.” Patience takes a seat on the couch across from the desk, and I am sitting in the chair next to her. Patience is soft-spoken with a gentle manner. She is a striking woman, tall with a round face and high cheekbones. She sits with both hands resting in her lap. I ask about the campaign ING has waged to liberate the Trokosi against a religious tradition that is ancient and where the belief is so strongly held and defended. I ask her to talk about the strategy of persuading the priests and shrine owners to free the women and girls. Patience sits up on the couch and confidently speaks into the tape recorder sitting on the table next to the couch:

The “power of persuasion” is given profound force and meaning because persuasion here is dependent not only on human lives and freedom but the disruption of a sacred worldview. How do you persuade one human being not to deny the humanity of another? How do you make them listen to you? How do you make them stop believing in what they believe is God's will when God's will means devaluing the lives of

others? The urgency of the kind of “persuasion” being crafted here begins with empathy and respect that is explicitly concerned with how the other “feels” and “understands.” This is a magnanimous gesture because it is ultimately a confrontation with “wrongness.” To sit across from someone you know is not only wrong but also acting wrongfully and to *genuinely listen* to that person is not only a good tactic of persuasion but also an act of compassionate engagement. The structures of feeling that encompass the Troxovi/Trokosi practice must be replaced by another discursive practice and another structure of feeling that must begin with trust. Feelings of wrongness are eclipsed by the importance of being trusted. Trust is the foundation on which persuasion begins—compassionate engagement and empathetic listening becomes its method. In the *Teachings of Ptahhotep* (ca.2400 BCE), one of the earliest ancient Kemetian (Egyptian) “books of instruction” (Hord & Lee, 1995, p.17), the mayor of the city, Vizier Ptahhotep, presents an elaborate list (approximately 37) of codes of conduct. These codes are “life instructions” that ensure each individual a place in the eternal network of the universe after his or her death. This is one of the codes in the ancient writing that speaks to the notion of trust:

If you are among the people, then gain your supporters by building trust. The trusted man is one who does not speak the first thing that comes to mind; and he will become a leader. A man of means has a good name, and his face is benign. People will praise him even without his knowledge. On the other hand, he whose heart obeys his belly asks for contempt of himself in the place of love. His heart is naked. His body is unanointed. The great-hearted is a gift of God. He who is ruled by his appetite belongs to the enemy. (Hord & Lee, 1995, p. 26)

In accordance with this passage, Patience is trusted because she listens, she is humble among them, and the people have spoken among themselves of her “good name.” They believe she is not motivated by greed or self-interest—her heart does not “obey her belly”—but the interests of Others, their interests. I witnessed the affection and “trust” among the people she worked with from village to village. The question now becomes this: Once trust is gained and a new discourse is possible, what are the alternative actions offered by these rights activists that lead to sustained change? First, we understand that when the girls and women are released from the shrine, they are not left alone. Patience continues,

Once the priests were able to have trust, the conversation began, and then the possibility of an alternative logic became possible and, finally, plausible. What evolves from the meeting between priest and rights activist is more than compromise and negotiation; it is to create something not done before, to create a generative cultural formation, that is, an alternative practice and belief now valued and shared anew. It is a different way of being. The religion remains, but reformed and consciously changed from a reevaluation of the past in order to save its future and preserve the core of its meaning. They must change a practice within the discourse of rights and freedom in order to save the religion. But to remake cultural practice means that the point between what was and what the activists hope the religion will become requires creating the connection between past and future, the connection that constitutes what is to be done *now*. As Patience says, “All this is not a one-day affair;” it is a long-term commitment. Kwame Nkrumah (1998), the intellectual, socialist philosopher, and the first president of Ghana after Independence, stated, “Indeed, for the African, everything

that exists, exists as a complex of forces in tension.... It is out of tension that being is born. Becoming is tension, and being is the child of that tension of opposed forces and tendencies" (pp. 90–92). This "being" that is "born" is based on the relentless labor—the indigenous, critical methodology—of local human rights activism that was in opposition to the practices of the Trokosi shrine. Nkrumah reminds us that we begin with these tensions, these opposing forces, in order for change and for rebirth to occur. Here, tension is not simply the differing ideological beliefs between the priests and the activists on first contact, but it is how these tensions were manifest and enacted through persistent and continued visitations by the activists to the shrines. Each encounter that was constituted by tension was a move closer to Nkrumah's rebirth.

I observed the dedication of Patience and the other activists at ING through their comings and goings and coming back again and again with the commitment to give the Troxovi/Trokosi the knowledge that they possessed a *self*. I witnessed ING activists do the work of gifting these women and girls with the tools toward independent living while helping them to reenter their communities against the forces of a long-held stigma. I witnessed the infinitely human right of selfhood come slowly and methodically into being.

The position of being both an "insider" and "outsider" suggests that one possesses a certain kind of knowledge or authority regarding the relational dynamics of two contrasting or competing worlds. It also implies that the insider/outsider has the ability to move between these worlds with difficulty or ease, translating and often enacting his or her divergent codes, costumes, laws, and so on. Therefore, the assumption of a certain authority of knowledge is also based on the experience and history of what it means to be *affected* corporally and emotionally by what happens or has happened in those contrasting worlds and, moreover, to have survived them. It is important for the activists to make it known to the Troxovi/Trokosi as well as the priests that they are not just outsiders but are "from where they are from" not only in knowledge but have experienced through body and feelings what it is to be of a place—to know the people, to eat the food, to speak the language, to walk the same paths for water, to share the same memories of the place. This being *from* the same place conjoined with being *of* a different place is an interesting paradox. Being from the same place provided an authority of knowledge of what goes on in the same place and the unique feelings about it, that is, "I care and know about what goes on here." But being of a different place provides an authority of knowledge of what the alternatives or other possibilities of what the same place could be: "I care and know about another way to be." I do not mean to privilege a one-way direction of change; that is, the outsider domain always wants to change the insider domain or vice versa. The point is that the insider/outsider position does garner hybrid knowledge or specialized knowledge that creates the space of different and new realities (Anzaldúa, 1987; Collins, 1990; hooks, 1989; Madison, 2005). Ghanaians in exile most penetratingly experience the insider/outsider phenomenon from a slightly different perspective than these rights activists, but it is nonetheless relevant to this discussion. the Ghanaian poet, Abena P.A. Busia (1993), states,

In every instance, my various identifications—as scholar, as poet, as Black, as female, as African, an exile, as an Afro-Saxon living in Afro-America—are always present. Even in my identification as Ghanaian, which I stated so boldly at the start, I am the child of a woman whose people are

patrilineal who married a man whose people are matrilineal. Am I thus doubly claimed, or doubly disposed? None of these categories is mutually exclusive. They coexist and are the boundaries within which I must exist or which I have come to cross every waking moment. (p. 209)

Many of the rights activists who work with ING choose not to leave the country. They stay in Ghana to do the work of human rights. However, when they leave the city to go to the villages—taking with them their new ideas about an ancient religion and a revered cultural practice—they are often regarded as foreigners, as outsiders. I have witnessed the “various identifications” that Busia (1993) describes: Patience and her colleagues move in and out between English in the city and Ewe and Twi in the villages; between the faster body rhythms of the city and the slower, deliberate strength demanded of village life; and between their philosophical interchanges on human rights at meetings and conferences and their flesh-to-flesh embodied interchanges of food, story, and companionship in the village. It is in these “waking moments” that I have witnessed the multiple identities of Ghanaian people in Ghana doing the work for themselves on their land.

The final section of the narrative is a poetic treatise on *difference* and how to embrace what is innately human about difference for the sake of making a radical and revolutionary *difference* for the life of another. It reflects the value of both the antihumanist and humanist philosophy. In the antihumanist tradition, this section of the narrative further shows us that humankind is *produced by* discourse, events, and history. And, in the humanist tradition, the narrative shows us that humankind are *producers of* discourse, events, and history, especially when one human being communicates a yearning to another and thereby creates a dialogical alchemy that, in turn, sets forth alternative ways of being.

The interview was about to end as I said thank you and slowly reached over to turn off the tape recorder when Patience raised her hand very gently to indicate that there was one more thing she wanted to say:

As I am about to leave the room, my friend Wisdom Mensah, who is program director of ING, enters. Wisdom is an invaluable resource for me in understanding all sides of the issues and what it meant to witness human rights in action as I watched him go into the field negotiating with stakeholders on all sides, counseling rights activists, and working with Reverend Pimpong in setting the record straight against the attacks by certain traditionalists against ING so they may keep up the struggle to liberate more women and girls from the shrines. Wisdom informs me that Mrs. Okudzeto, the headmaster of the ING Trokosi Vocational Training School, is outside and wants to come in and say hello. I met Mrs. Okudzeto several months before when I went to visit the school where they teach the newly freed Troxovi/Trokosi how to read and write, as well as vocational training in dressmaking, cosmetology, catering, batik, weaving,³ and making soap. Mrs. Okudzeto carries herself with unwavering confidence; she is outspoken and cheerful with a witty sense of humor. Before I met her, Wisdom mentioned how much she “loved the girls” at the school and how she was such a “very efficient” headmaster. I am pleased to know Mrs. Okudzeto has arrived because I wanted to speak with her about a gentleman who had come by my flat about 2 weeks ago to tell me that any Ghanaian who was against the Trokosi practice was against their ancestors and their heritage. He said the activists were spreading lies about the abuses in the shrines because “the fact is the girls are treated honorably, like queens.” He went on

to say, “The people that want to stop the practice are spreading lies in order to get European and American money.” He then stated emphatically, “Trokosi will never come to an end and if any one tries to stop it, they will stop it over my dead body!”

When I told Mrs. Okudzeto about the visitor, her response was a mixture of exasperation and irritation:

The African symbol of *Sankofa* is a majestic bird whose commanding body is positioned forward while the bird's long, elegant neck dramatically circles backward gazing into the past. Sankofa symbolizes the significance of the past and tradition in order to move toward the present and future. The man who came to see me referred to the Sankofa symbol and then explained that his mission was to “uphold and defend African culture and religion against those who want to denigrate and destroy our traditions.” He did not make a distinction between the shrines that were abusive and those that were not. His defense of tradition was in many ways contrary to the organization Afrikania or Afrikan Renaissance Mission, a well-known traditional organization in Ghana that openly exposes and condemns the abusive “breakaway shrines” while also identifying itself explicitly as being of “Sankofa faith” in its mission as a defender, teacher, and celebrant of African tradition. My visitor was more concerned about defending the Troxovi/Trokosi institution from its critics, without exception, than he was about women and girls being maltreated in certain shrines. This was also the case for several other defenders of the Troxovi/Trokosi institution. For the visitor to say “over my dead body” was not an uncommon charge for those who believe that criticizing African tradition (particularly African religious tradition) was an abomination.

In Ghana, I came to understand more than ever (for better and for worse) that tradition is the life breath of the past and the very ground upon which the present stands and the future is even possible. Traditional religion is evidence of the past but, more, it is also the hope, creation, and embodiment of a *generation of people*. Tradition is evidence. It is the sacred materialization of what those who came before believed, valued, and yearned. I learned that to defy cultural and religious tradition is to defy the sacred debt we owe to the ancestor. It is to defy the sacred being of our kinship. But I also had to ask, What happens when tradition does harm? What of those who did defy tradition and dare to oppose it and want to change it? How did Mrs. Okudzeto and other rights activists begin to believe differently and work for change? In Kwame Gyekye's (1997) important and classic book *Tradition and Modernity*, he eloquently addresses this question:

To say that a belief or practice is handed down to a generation is to say that it is bequeathed to the generation, passed on to it. But what this really means is that the belief or practice is placed at the disposal of the new generation in the expectation that the generation would preserve it. But the preservation of it, in part or in whole, would depend very much on the attitude the new generation adopts toward it and would not necessarily be automatic, as the word “transmit” would suggest. If we look back across the line, we find that some of the cultural values created ... are dropped by subsequent generations, or they simply sink into oblivion—winnowed away by time. Those values were, for one reason or another, not accepted, maintained, or preserved by subsequent generations. This means that the continuity and survival of a pristine cultural product depends on the normative considerations that will be brought to bear on it by a subsequent generation. The forebears—the

previous generation—do not “transmit” their cultural creation as such; what they do, rather is to place them at the disposal of subsequent generations of people. But the subsequent generations may on normative or other rational grounds, either accept, refine, or preserve them or spurn, depreciate them, abandon them. The desire or intention of a subsequent generation to preserve or abandon inherited cultural products often results from some kind of *evaluation* [emphasis added] of those cultural products and the tradition they lead to. *Such critical evaluations are essential for the growth and revitalization of cultural tradition.* (p.221)

I experienced in Ghana that “evaluation” of the kind that invokes *alternatives* within one's own culture and society is primarily an admixture of (1) serious reflection. I am compelled, often by my circumstances or a particular situation, to contemplate and evaluate where and how I live and, in turn, the workings of my life and my environment. What is guiding and determining the world of my being? I begin to dream of possible alternatives. (2) Mobility. I move from the micro-space of my own world to witness another world and way of being. My world is not all there is. I discover how Others live. I experience their movements, ways of speaking, productions, and their futures as different from my own. I witness alternative experiences. (3) Disturbance. I feel the weight of a lingering and substantial discontent. I am not at ease or at peace within my environment. I begin to resent the workings of my world and feel disconnected to it. (4) Language. I embrace a new language. I begin to formulate the words out of which I can now name and describe my discontent and the doomed future of my own world. I now speak about alternative ways of being within my own world and alternative futures. Language orders, generates, and materializes my lingering discontent as well as new reflections and hopes for a different world and way of being. (5) Comrades. I am emboldened by like minds and comrades. I can now speak, act, and feel with others who substantiate and inspire my hope for alternatives. Together, we act for change.

So what does it mean when the evaluation must now move to change? Mrs. Okudzeto has evaluated the tradition as an “outmoded practice,” and she, like Reverend Pimpong, Wisdom, Patience, and so many others, takes “evaluation” a step further. She is an activist, and her evaluation generates praxis.

li: The Location of Poverty

I have been traveling back and forth across the Atlantic to Ghana, West Africa, since 1998. I remain struck by the abiding harm some religious traditions around the world have upon the life and freedom of others, particularly women and girls. I am also struck by how often these same traditions are revered and glorified by some members of the culture in the face of the blatant abuse the traditions impose upon the female body. But I am more struck by something else that I believe is equally, if not more, unjust and life threatening, but certainly more convoluted and disguised, and that is how the history and present of global politics and power operate in affecting people across the world, particularly in the global South. I am referring specifically to the injustice of the location of poverty.⁴

It is at this point where the politics of poverty must enter the conversation. My work with Ghanaian human

rights activism and my experiences with the Troxovi/Trokosi institution were complicated even further when I came into contact with what seemed to be an ingrained ideology of phallocentrism⁵ and male domination that was inseparable from the stark reality of wretched poverty. It is often difficult to summarize the Troxovi/Trokosi institution because how it is practiced, even what it is called, is contingent on the *economy of its location*. I include here an excerpt from my field journal of March 1999:

Dear Journal,

This is becoming yet another classic case of human rights and its relationship to poverty. As I travel through the areas where Troxovi/Trokosi is practiced, I am struck by how the maltreatment of women and girls is in direct correlation with the economic and material conditions of the area. What has “Development” over the past decades accomplished here? Sometimes one can only feel rage. Arturo Escobar’s work on Development speaks to the question. I paste his words here on this page.

Whatever these traditional ways might have been, and without idealizing them, it is true that massive poverty in the modern sense appeared only when the spread of the market economy broke down community ties and deprived millions of people from access to land, water and other resources. With the consolidation of Capitalism, systematic pauperization became inevitable (Escobar, 1992, p.22).

In the poorest areas, the areas that are more remote and distanced from the city and where piped water, electricity, education are scarce or inaccessible, the treatment of women and girls is more severe and their labor more demanding. It is clear to me that the Trokosi/Troxovi Institution is not one monolithic or unified cultural practice. What it is and how it is performed across the various shrines is very different and, again, contingent on the level of the economy in the area. There is a tension here between oppression from male dominance and oppression from poverty—the colonial past complicates each within discretely differing force fields.

March 22, 1999

Regrettably, in some conversations, poverty is becoming wearisome, and sexism is too easily separated from the political economy. The point here is that traditional patriarchy and phallocentrism alone do not account for the consequences of poverty or “determine relations of production and reproduction” that exploit the lives and labor of African women:

Patriarchal relations do not determine the material basis of the relations of production and reproduction. What is revealed here is that an examination of only the patriarchal relations of both precapitalist and colonial capitalist societies will not explain how women’s exploitation and oppression were shaped by the historical limits, changes and differences of these societies. The cultural, familial and political reality of African women was restructured with the introduction of

commodity production based on monopoly of the means of production, racist ideology, and a policy of separate political and economic development. Under colonial capitalism African women experienced three forms of exploitation based on African Women's position in production, African women's position in the family and African Women's racial position in colonial society. (Courville, 1993, p. 42)

Courville (1993) echoes the position of post-colonial writers in asserting that with the onset of the colonial epoch, African women were now exploited by the “coexistence of dual political systems, dual patriarchal systems and dual modes of production,” yet they were not identical dualities (p. 41). The existence of a colonial capitalist mode of production was of a different kind and degree of production than it was under the traditional, African patriarchal mode of production. Although African women lived under the oppressive and exploitive forces of male control, despite these constraints, they still had a certain amount of power within the familial household. The family was “the source of their social standing and their limited protection within the society, and the site and foundation for collective action to express their dissatisfaction and bring about change” (Courville, 1993, p. 36). Therefore, from a more *local commodity production* to foreign *monopoly colonial capitalism*, “Colonialism was the process of the forced and violent integration of the African continent into the world capitalist system” (Courville, 1993, p. 36).

Major factors that combined to bring forth colonial domination were (a) military intervention, (b) the transformation of African economies into monetary economies, (c) the intrusion and exploitation of imperialist colonial trade, and (d) foreign investment in the development of infrastructure and metropolitanism (Ake, 1981, p. 32). Compounding these forces was the colonial policies of indirect rule where “the colonial state controlled and supervised the separate political and economic development of the colonizer” and, as a result, sealed the “underdevelopment of the colonized” (Ake, 1981).

The oppressive constraints upon African women from antiquity to Independence were a factor of both traditional African society and colonial capitalism. Indeed, African women were constrained under traditional African patriarchy, yet under the very nature of these laws (by which the patriarchal society existed), they were still able to carve out for themselves precarious elements of independence, and yet this troubled and fragile independence was, in many circumstances, diminished with the intrusion of colonial capitalism. Therefore, the idea that colonialism brought “progress” to a “backward” continent by introducing technology, culture, and infrastructural development becomes an assertion riddled with falsehoods, contradictions, and contingencies, as does the idea by some Afrocentrists of a traditional African culture based on egalitarian bliss and a spiritual utopia. How does this history of traditional patriarchy and colonial capitalism speak to present-day poverty and human rights? How does it “seal the ‘underdevelopment of the continent’”? Drawing from the work of Claude Ake, Courville (1993) summarizes the contemporary economic and social effects of colonial capitalism and patriarchy:

The economic relations were characterized by an aggregation of disparate modes of production, dependence on external trade and technology, disarticulation of resources, development of export commodities, market imperfections, and limited indigenous capital to mobilize for investment and

development. The social relations of the colonial society were based on disparate aggregations of African and European patriarchies accompanied by racially structured domination and subordination. (p. 40)

Ake (1981) lists the very foundations upon which present-day poverty rests: trade, technology, natural resources, indigenous capital, the market, and modes of production. Each of these domains combines to form a political economy that breeds poverty and that sets a climate for human rights offenses. In the face of global capitalism and poverty, indigenous human rights activists carry the legacy of a colonial past that makes their work even harder.

III: Conclusion: My Wish List

In this chapter, indigenous methods of human rights defense are narrated as a “performance in print” (Nfah-Abbenyi, 1997) and as a subaltern praxis in the determination to make a change in the troubled time and space and on the contested land where these Ghanaian activists live and choose to remain. Against the representations and effects of popular discourse, African people are more than victims and abusers of human rights who are enlightened and/or saved by Western ideology and benevolence.

I enter the day-to-day labor “on the ground” with those in their own country working for human rights and who choose to face the added struggle of going against the forces of tradition and economic forces. The questions that now begin to surface are the following: What does it mean for our scholarly projects to seek out and present the theoretical offerings and scholarly arguments from those not popularly known but profoundly worthy? What does it mean to seek out and present the “doings” and the work “done” of indigenous activism in locations that are some of the most contested in the world? These are the guiding questions that constitute my work as a critical performance ethnographer and that undergird this chapter. These questions also enliven my ever growing *wish list*. This “wish list” not only enumerates the direction I tried to follow in this chapter but the direction in which I continue to work toward in the future.

Wish List

First. We do not become senselessly enthralled with critical theory, nor do we become dour theory bashers. Instead, we learn critical theory thoughtfully, rigorously, and purposefully for the politically charged objective of clarifying unproductive confusion and precisely naming what could be otherwise dangerously imprecise.

Second. We resist theoretical feudalism by not assigning the power of interpretation *exclusively* to a few lords of knowledge in privileged, expected, and anticipated Towers of Ivory or Babel. The form of this kind of theorizing that is taking place in certain circles is undemocratic, and the contents have become repetitive clichés. We seek theory from near and far, the expected and the unexpected, from the tower and from the ground, so theory remains relevant, useful, interesting, and generative. Knowing all these different theories demands hard, rigorous work, but these troubled times demand it even more.

Third. We do not speak for Others when we can *listen* while Others speak.

Fourth. We do not, not speak while *only* humbly listening to the Other speak. Listening does not mean NOT speaking; it means paying attention to when it is the right time to speak. At that time, speak to and from the tower AND the ground, even if *your voice shakes*.⁶

Fifth. We practice at home what we preach on paper and in the field. We work to become more generous with each other *within* the academy as we work for a politics of global generosity. I wish that we are generous with each other at every opportunity, and when there are no opportunities, we create them. I wish that academic generosity (of information, influence, resources, and praise) becomes as important to us as academic freedom.

Patience's deep and simple clarity is the point:

When I play a part in this person's life to make it better, I am happy.

Notes

1. Many traditionalists will refer to Troxovi/Trokosi as an institution while others regard it as a practice; I use *practice* and *institution* interchangeably throughout the chapter.
2. International Needs Ghana is now International Needs Network–Ghana.
3. Sleeping mats are very common in many parts of the developing world. They are used for sleeping (in the house or outside) as floor coverings and sometimes as prayer mats. They range in appearance from plain straw mats to colorful designs of varying sorts.
4. What I am calling “the location of poverty” is a supplement to the notion of a “location of culture.” In the Ghana context relative to Trokosi, an understanding of culture is impossible without an understanding of the systems of poverty that affect and in many ways determine it.
5. I am consciously using the term *phallocentrism* here to echo bell hooks's (1989) notion of the phallic as sexually centered male domination over the female body without necessarily having structural or material power or membership within the national or dominant political system.
6. I am referring here to one of my favorite bumper stickers: “Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes.”

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