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*Forum Theatre as Participatory Research in Oral Heritage Communities: Evidence from Asebu, Ghana*

# Forum Theatre as Participatory Research in Oral Heritage Communities: Evidence from Asebu, Ghana

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**Abstract**
This paper examines Forum Theatre as a participatory research methodology for engaging oral heritage communities, drawing on evidence from a nine-month fieldwork study in the Asebu Traditional Area of the Central Region of Ghana. Grounded in qualitative, interpretivist research within the historical-case study design, the study employed in-depth interviews, participant observation, and participatory performance practice across 18 communities. The paper argues that Forum Theatre offers a culturally congruent methodology for accessing, documenting, and revitalising oral heritage in communities where knowledge transmission relies on embodied and performative traditions. Findings reveal that Forum Theatre created democratic spaces for community dialogue, enabled the recovery of fragmented oral narratives about the cultural hero Amenfi, and fostered critical consciousness among community members regarding the value of their intangible cultural heritage. The study demonstrates that conventional interview-based methods alone are insufficient for capturing the performative, affective, and communal dimensions of oral heritage, and that Forum Theatre bridges the gap between research extraction and community empowerment. Participant voices illuminate how the methodology facilitated the re-engagement of elders and youth with oral traditions threatened by formal education, foreign religion, and urbanisation. The paper contributes to debates on decolonising research methodologies in African contexts and offers a replicable framework for participatory heritage research.

## Introduction

The question of how knowledge is generated, accessed, and validated in community contexts remains central to debates in development research, particularly in societies where cultural memory is sustained through oral and performative traditions. In many African communities, knowledge is not primarily stored in written texts but is embodied in performances. Performance forms such as storytelling, music, ritual, and communal enactment are media through which history, values, and identity are continuously reproduced. These traditions present both an opportunity and a challenge for researchers seeking to engage meaningfully with community knowledge systems.

The challenge of conducting meaningful community development research in rural African communities is well documented in the literature. Conventional research instruments such as structured interviews, questionnaires, and formal focus groups often prove inadequate when applied in communities whose primary modes of knowledge production, transmission, and communication



are rooted in oral and performative traditions (Mlama, 1991; Kerr, 1995). In such communities, knowledge is not simply spoken or written; it is danced, sung, enacted, and embodied in rituals, festivals, and public performances that have sustained collective memory across generations. The methodological implications of this reality are significant, yet applied theatre and community development scholarship have only partially addressed them.

This limitation is not merely technical but epistemological. Research approaches that rely heavily on verbal, text-based data risk fragmenting knowledge that is inherently communal, performative, and embodied. When oral heritage is extracted through interviews or reduced to transcripts, it is detached from the performative contexts that give it meaning, resulting in partial and sometimes distorted representations. At the same time, conventional research designs tend to reproduce hierarchical relationships between researcher and researched, positioning community members as sources of data rather than as co-producers of knowledge. In postcolonial contexts, these dynamics raise not only methodological but also ethical concerns, particularly regarding the extractive tendencies of externally driven research practices.

Although participatory and applied theatre approaches have long been utilised within Theatre for Development (TfD) practice, their systematic articulation as research methodologies, particularly in relation to oral heritage, remains underdeveloped. There is therefore a need for approaches that are not only methodologically robust but also culturally resonant with the epistemological foundations of the communities under study. Such approaches must be capable of engaging with knowledge as performance, facilitating communal validation of meaning, and repositioning participants as active agents in the research process.

This paper responds to that gap by examining the deployment of Forum Theatre as a participatory research and development methodology informed by Boal's (1979/2000) *Theatre of the Oppressed* and by Freire's (1970/2000) theory of conscientisation, in the context of fieldwork conducted in the Asebu Traditional Area of Ghana's Central Region. The fieldwork investigated how the legendary life and cultural legacies of Amenfi, the founding cultural hero of the Asebu Kingdom, could be mobilised to stimulate rural community transformation.

In doing so, this study seeks to examine the effectiveness of Forum Theatre as a participatory research methodology for generating and validating oral heritage knowledge, and to analyse the extent to which its processes facilitate community conscientisation and engagement in the preservation and transformation of cultural heritage. More broadly, the study is concerned with demonstrating the potential of Forum Theatre to operate simultaneously as a research instrument and a development praxis, extending the epistemological reach of qualitative inquiry while contributing directly to community empowerment and cultural sustainability.

The Asebu Traditional Area, comprising eighteen communities in the Abura-Asebu-Kwamankese District, offered a particularly generative setting for this inquiry. This is a community whose entire cultural identity, encompassing naming practices, festivals, sacred landmarks, governance structures, and communal values, is organised around the oral history of a single heroic figure. Forum Theatre was adopted in this study not only as a tool for gathering data, but as a methodology capable of simultaneously generating knowledge and stimulating the very community consciousness it sought to study. As Mda (1993) observed, the most generative forms of Theatre for Development are not imposed on communities from outside but arise from within them, drawing on the community's own performative vocabulary and cultural resources. In Asebu, the oral history of Amenfi provided exactly such a vocabulary: rich, emotionally resonant, and already in active performative circulation through festivals, songs, dirges, and public rituals. The Forum Theatre process created conditions under which

this vocabulary could be channelled into critical dramatic action, enabling community members to examine their own development challenges through the very cultural forms they already inhabited.

The paper makes three interconnected arguments. First, that Forum Theatre functions most powerfully when it is grounded in a community's existing performative traditions rather than introduced as a foreign theatrical form. Second, in the Asebu context, Forum Theatre served a dual function, operating both as a research instrument that brought to life embodied knowledge inaccessible through conventional methods and as a development praxis that conscientised community members about their cultural capital and its transformative potential. Third, the Asebu case has broader implications for TfD theory and practice in sub-Saharan Africa, where the persistence of rich oral performance traditions in rural communities represents an underutilised resource for both applied research and community transformation.

## Literature Review

The scholarship most relevant to this study spans three interconnected bodies of work, namely the theoretical and practical literature on Forum Theatre and its applications as a participatory methodology, the growing field of oral heritage research and its methodological challenges in African contexts, and the theoretical frameworks of cultural functionalism and conscientisation that together underpin the study's analytical approach. Across these bodies of work, Forum Theatre has received sustained attention as a tool for social development and political conscientisation, and oral heritage has been examined both as a site of cultural value and as a domain under acute threat from colonially inflected modernity. What remains underexplored is the intersection of these two concerns: how Forum Theatre might function as an epistemologically appropriate research instrument within oral heritage discourse, one capable of accessing, validating, and revitalising knowledge that conventional qualitative methods cannot adequately reach. The review that follows maps these bodies of work and identifies the specific gaps that this study addresses.

### *Origin and Principles of Forum Theatre*

Forum Theatre emerged from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979/2000), which drew directly on Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Boal argued that conventional theatre perpetuated a spectator-performer dichotomy that mirrored broader structures of social oppression, reducing ordinary people to passive observers (Boal, 2000). Forum Theatre disrupts this hierarchy by inviting audience members, whom Boal termed "spect-actors," to intervene in the dramatic action, replace characters, and propose alternative courses of action (Boal, 1995).

The method involves three phases, beginning with exercises to "de-mechanise" habitual patterns of perception and interaction (Boal, 2002); collaborative development of short dramatic scenarios based on situations of oppression drawn from lived experience; and public performance of these scenarios, during which audience members are invited to stop the action and enact alternative solutions (Boal, 2000; Wrentschur, 2021). Central to the process is the Joker (facilitator), who mediates between performers and audience without prescribing solutions, posing questions that stimulate the critical reflection Freire (1970/2000) termed "conscientisation."

### *Forum Theatre as Participatory Research Methodology*

While Forum Theatre was originally conceived as a tool for political conscientisation, scholars have increasingly recognised its potential as a participatory research methodology (Erel et al., 2017; Prentki & Preston, 2009; Wrentschur, 2021; Fontana & Perrier, 2024). Wrentschur (2021) positioned it as a "dramatic and participatory research approach" sharing methodological affinities with Participatory Action Research (PAR), but with distinctive epistemological features. Unlike conventional qualitative methods, Forum Theatre generates data "beyond text and language-based methods" (Erel et al., 2017,

p. 309), accessing the embodied, affective, and relational dimensions of social experience that interviews and focus groups may miss. It transforms participants from research subjects into co-researchers who actively shape the research process, aligning with broader calls to decolonise research methodologies by centring indigenous knowledge systems and community action (Smith, 2012; Chambers, 2014).

In the African context, theatrical and performative methodologies have deep roots. Abah (1997) documented Theatre for Development (TfD) practices in Nigeria; Asiama (2010) examined the role of theatre in self-development among the Buem of Ghana; and Breed et al. (2022) and Bame (1991) documented how traditional performance forms, including storytelling, dance, and ritual, functioned as modes of communal knowledge production and social regulation. These studies establish that participatory performance is not an alien imposition but resonates with indigenous African traditions of communal dialogue and decision-making (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1998).

Forum Theatre's specific methodological value in heritage research lies in its capacity to create what Boal (2000) described as a "rehearsal for reality," that is, a safe performative space in which community members can explore, contest, and reconstruct cultural narratives beyond the constraints of everyday social interaction. Conventional interview settings reproduce power asymmetries that may inhibit disclosure of sensitive cultural knowledge; Forum Theatre dissolves this dyad into a communal space where multiple voices contribute simultaneously to knowledge production (Wrentschur, 2021). Ethnographic interviews privilege verbal, propositional knowledge over embodied and relational knowledge (Conquergood, 2002); survey instruments impose predetermined categories that may not align with indigenous knowledge systems; and focus groups, though dialogical, typically remain anchored in verbal exchange. Forum Theatre, by contrast, engages the full spectrum of communicative modalities, including speech, song, dance, gesture, and ritual performance, through which oral heritage communities produce and reproduce cultural knowledge.

This multimodal engagement is not merely methodological convenience but epistemological necessity. In oral heritage communities, knowledge is not stored in propositions but enacted in performance (Finnegan, 2012). Moreover, the participatory structure of Forum Theatre ensures that the research process itself contributes to heritage sustainability rather than heritage extraction: community members simultaneously transmit oral traditions to younger generations, validate them through communal endorsement, and adapt them to contemporary contexts. This generative function distinguishes Forum Theatre from extractive methodologies and aligns it with emerging frameworks for ethical research in indigenous communities (Smith, 2012).

***Oral Heritage and Methodological Challenges***

Oral heritage, defined by UNESCO (2016) as the totality of oral traditions and expressions, including language, songs, rituals, and festive events, faces acute threats in many African communities. Formal education, urbanisation, and the displacement of indigenous languages by colonial idioms have disrupted intergenerational transmission, lending urgency to the popular adage that "when an elder dies, a library burns" (Agyekum, 2013; Eichler, 2021).

Oral heritage presents distinctive methodological challenges. Unlike material heritage, oral traditions are inseparable from the performative contexts in which they are enacted (Finnegan, 2012; Gwerevende et al., 2023): an oral historical narrative is a performative event involving audience participation, call-and-response patterns, musical accompaniment, and ritual framing (Vansina, 1985). Conventional interview methods, which extract individual testimony from these communal contexts, inevitably fragment the very phenomena they seek to study. Compounding this is what might be termed the "paradox of documentation": recording oral traditions through audio, transcription, or

archival means fundamentally alters their character by removing them from living contexts. A transcribed oral narrative is no longer an oral narrative but a text, subject to different interpretive protocols and divorced from the performative conventions that give it meaning (Vansina, 1985).

The African context adds further complexity. Awedoba (2005) described a "crisis of cultural confidence" in many sub-Saharan communities resulting from colonial denigration of indigenous knowledge, causing community members to internalise negative evaluations of their own heritage. Research methodologies that merely request information about oral traditions may inadvertently reinforce this dynamic by treating cultural knowledge as a resource to be extracted rather than a living practice to be celebrated. Forum Theatre addresses this by creating conditions in which oral heritage is not merely discussed but performed, celebrated, and publicly validated, thereby transforming the research encounter into a public affirmation of cultural knowledge, countering narratives of cultural inferiority, and fostering community pride in oral heritage.

Taken together, these bodies of work reveal two persistent absences in the literature: first, a methodologically elaborated account of Forum Theatre deployed specifically as a research instrument in oral heritage contexts, distinct from its established uses in political conscientisation and social development; and second, empirical evidence from African oral heritage communities demonstrating how Forum Theatre can function simultaneously as research methodology and development praxis. The present study addresses both gaps, drawing on nine months of fieldwork in the Asebu Traditional Area of Ghana to demonstrate Forum Theatre's epistemological, methodological, and ethical advantages in communities whose knowledge systems are performatively rather than textually organised.

***Theoretical Framework: Cultural Functionalism and Conscientisation***

This study draws on two intersecting theoretical perspectives that together provide the epistemological foundation for the methodology advanced in this paper. Cultural functionalism (Malinowski, 1944; Kottak, 1991) frames oral heritage as a functional component of social systems, serving purposes of identity formation, social cohesion, moral instruction, and historical legitimation. From this perspective, the oral traditions of the Asebu community are not mere relics but active cultural institutions that continue to shape social life, performed in governance, enacted in festivals, and embedded in the fabric of everyday communal life. Cultural functionalism thus provides the analytical lens through which oral heritage can be understood as a living system with real developmental consequences, rather than an archival curiosity.

However, cultural functionalism alone risks a conservatism that can impede development. A strictly functionalist reading may lead researchers to preserve existing cultural forms uncritically, without attending to the ways those forms may also encode inequality, gender asymmetry, or historical grievance. It is here that Freire's (1970/2000) theory of conscientisation provides an essential corrective. Conscientisation refers to the process by which individuals and communities develop critical awareness of their social reality and their collective capacity to transform it. In Freire's formulation, it is praxis, that is, the dialectical unity of reflection and action through which people cease to be objects of their circumstances and become subjects of their own history.

Brought into dialogue, these two frameworks generate something neither yields alone. Cultural functionalism provides Forum Theatre with its justification for taking oral heritage seriously as a living, operative, and developmentally significant institution. Conscientisation provides Forum Theatre with its transformative ambition: not merely to observe that institution, but to enable communities to examine it critically, asking which of its dimensions serve contemporary needs and which are under threat, and to collectively determine how those threats might be addressed. In the

Asebu context, this synthesis was productive in a specific and observable way: community members did not merely enact the story of Amenfi during Forum Theatre sessions; they also interrogated the gap between what Amenfi represented, namely courage, sacrifice, and collective responsibility, and what they perceived as a failure to honour that legacy in contemporary communal life. This movement from enactment to critique is the hallmark of conscientised engagement with cultural heritage, and it could not have occurred through cultural functionalism alone.

It is also important to note the genealogical relationship between these theoretical traditions and Forum Theatre itself. Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979/2000) was directly and explicitly indebted to Freire's pedagogy, meaning the methodological and the theoretical are not merely aligned but constitute the same intellectual lineage. What the present study contributes to this lineage is the grounding of Forum Theatre in cultural functionalist analysis of oral heritage, an orientation particularly apposite in Ghanaian and broader West African contexts, where Bame (1991) and Ansu-Kyeremeh (1998) have demonstrated that performance and ritual are not supplementary to social functioning but constitutive of it. The integration of cultural functionalism and conscientisation thus does not impose a foreign theoretical apparatus on Asebu's oral traditions but engages with them through frameworks already responsive to the performative character of African communal life.

**Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist approach within a historical case study design (Creswell, 2009; Yin, 2009). This approach is suitable because the study focuses on a specific cultural context and draws on multiple data sources.

The research was conducted over nine months in the Asebu Traditional Area of the Abura/Asebu/Kwamankese District in the Central Region of Ghana. A total of thirty-two participants were involved, drawn from three groups: royalty (including the Omanhen, queen mothers, linguists, and clan heads), indigenes, and non-indigenes. Participants were selected using purposive, snowball, and accidental sampling techniques. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews (mainly in Fante), participant observation, Forum Theatre, and audio-visual recordings. The Forum Theatre process was based on issues identified during early fieldwork. Community members developed and performed a drama centred on the Amenfi story in the Asebu Amantsindo town square. Audience members (spect-actors) were invited to intervene in the performance, followed by facilitated discussions to reflect on the issues raised. Throughout the process, the researcher acted as a facilitator rather than a director, in line with Mda's (1993) approach to Theatre for Development.

Data analysis followed a narrative and thematic approach (Merriam, 2009). The researcher repeatedly reviewed video and audio recordings, field notes, and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns. Analysis involved comparing data across different sources to understand how knowledge was created and how meaning emerged through interaction and performance. To ensure validity, member checking was used, allowing participants to confirm and clarify interpretations

**Findings**

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, focusing on the processes through which Forum Theatre functioned as a participatory research methodology in the Asebu context. The findings are organised thematically to reflect the principal dimensions through which Forum Theatre shaped community engagement with oral heritage.

***Performance as Access: Reaching the Community Through Its Own Forms***

One of the most significant features of the Forum Theatre process in the Asebu context was its capacity to mobilise community participation at a scale and depth not observed in formal interviews or

structured observation. The Asebu community is one in which public performances such as songs, drumming, festival drama, and ceremonial oratory are not an occasional addition to communal life but a constitutive feature of it. Nketia (1954) observed that in Ghanaian communities, music and performance serve as primary vehicles for transmitting historical knowledge, social values, and collective identity. This was evident in Asebu, where the oral history of Amenfi was preserved both in the songs of Asafo performance groups and in the narrations of oral historians.

When Forum Theatre sessions were held in the Asebu Amantsindo town square, they were received by community members as a form of public performance consistent with existing cultural practices rather than as an unfamiliar research activity. The turnout was correspondingly large, including many community members, particularly elderly women, youth, and non-literate residents, who would have been less likely to participate in conventional research formats. This pattern of participation was closely associated with Forum Theatre's alignment with the community's established performance culture, consistent with Mlama's (1991) observations on participatory theatre practices in African contexts.

The community's response to the performative format of the research was articulated by one of the linguists who participated in the Forum Theatre sessions:

> *"This is how our fathers taught. They did not sit and read. They stood up, they showed, they called everyone to speak. What you have done is our own way of keeping knowledge alive" (Okyeame, fieldwork interview).*

This response suggests that participants perceived the Forum Theatre process as consistent with existing Asebu communicative practices rather than as an externally imposed research activity. A similar observation was made by one of the oral historians, who noted that the staging of the Amenfi narrative in the town square elicited forms of participation not encountered in interview settings:

> *"When we told the story standing up, in front of the community, people who had never spoken in an interview began to speak. The elders corrected each other. The young ones asked questions. Things that were forgotten came back" (oral historian, fieldwork interview).*

These accounts highlight the role of shared performance contexts in shaping how oral narratives were recalled, contested, and elaborated within the community.

***Forum Theatre as a Mechanism for Community Engagement with Oral Heritage***

Beyond their function as data-collection processes, the Forum Theatre sessions created conditions in which community members engaged more actively with questions of cultural knowledge and heritage. The study identified a pattern of cultural knowledge erosion in the Asebu community, particularly among younger members, some of whom associated the name Amenfi more readily with a contemporary public figure than with its historical significance (Asante, 2018).

The Forum Theatre sessions created a space in which this pattern became visible and discussable within the community. Oral narratives were not only recounted but enacted, and participants contributed to the unfolding performance through intervention and dialogue. In this context, community members engaged with the content of their oral heritage in ways that extended beyond passive recall.

Nana Mbrom IV, a queen mother, reflected on the relationship between the community and the Amenfi legacy, stating:

> *"The youth of this area are very dedicated and resourceful. I believe they all have the spirit of Amenfi. The reason why we don't see them here (Asebu) is that there are no jobs here for them. During festivals,*

> *if you call them to communal labour, they all respond, even the women amongst us. Amenfi dedicated his life for all of us and most of our young ones are emulating that" (Nana Mbrom IV, fieldwork interview)*

Responses from younger participants also indicated a shift in how the Amenfi narrative was understood:

> *"Before this performance, I only knew Amenfi as a name we hear at festivals. Now I understand why we say it. He is not just our history; he is a challenge to us to be courageous and to build something for this community" (youth participant, male, fieldwork interview).*

These responses reflect a movement from limited familiarity with the Amenfi tradition to a more active engagement with its meanings and contemporary relevance.

The study also identified several factors contributing to pressures on oral heritage transmission in Asebu

i. Foreign religion: The introduction of Christianity altered traditional cosmological frameworks and ritual practices associated with oral heritage transmission.

ii. Formal education: Western-style schooling displaced indigenous modes of knowledge transmission, including storytelling, apprenticeship, and ritual participation, with limited incorporation of local cultural history in formal curricula.

iii. Urbanisation and youth migration: Economic conditions contributed to youth migration, disrupting intergenerational transmission of oral traditions.

iv. Oral fragmentation: Variations in the transmission of oral narratives resulted in multiple and sometimes conflicting versions of key historical accounts

Within this context, Forum Theatre provided a setting in which these issues were collectively articulated and explored through performance and dialogue.

***Challenges and Limitations of Forum Theatre as a Research Methodology***

The deployment of Forum Theatre in the Asebu context also revealed several methodological challenges that shaped the research process.

i. Sacred knowledge: Certain aspects of oral heritage were considered too sensitive for public performance. Ritual knowledge associated with spiritual practices, chieftaincy, and deities remained subject to traditional restrictions, limiting their inclusion in Forum Theatre sessions.

ii. Outsider-facilitator dynamics: The researcher's position as an external facilitator influenced the process in multiple ways. While this position enabled discussion of contested issues, it also introduced the possibility of reproducing hierarchical dynamics within a participatory framework.

iii. Concerns about cultural commodification: Some participants expressed concern that the research process could lead to the misrepresentation or external appropriation of cultural heritage.

iv. Participation and representation: Participation in Forum Theatre sessions reflected existing social structures, with elders and male participants more visible in performance and dialogue, while women and younger participants contributed less frequently.

v. Documentation and analysis constraints: The multimodal nature of Forum Theatre, incorporating speech, gesture, music, and audience interaction, presented challenges for documentation and analysis. While audio-visual recordings and field notes were used, certain aspects of the performative experience were not fully captured.

These findings describe the processes through which knowledge was generated, performed, and negotiated within the Asebu community; their broader methodological and theoretical implications are taken up in the Discussion section.

**Discussion**

The Asebu findings contribute to emerging scholarship positioning Forum Theatre not merely as a tool for community development or political conscientisation but as a legitimate and epistemologically distinctive research methodology. The Asebu evidence advances this discourse in three important and interconnected respects, each corresponding to the arguments advanced in the Introduction.

***Grounding Forum Theatre in Indigenous Performance Traditions***

The study demonstrates that Forum Theatre functions most powerfully when grounded in a community's existing performative traditions rather than introduced as a foreign theatrical form. The Asebu findings show that Forum Theatre's capacity to generate deep and broad community engagement was directly proportional to its resonance with indigenous Asebu communicative practice. The community experienced Forum Theatre sessions not as a research technique but as an extension of the very performative traditions through which their oral heritage was already transmitted.

Forum Theatre possesses distinctive epistemological capacities for heritage research that conventional qualitative methods lack, specifically in that its performative format enables the elicitation of embodied, musical, ritual, and communal dimensions of oral heritage that remain inaccessible to interview-based methods. This finding resonates with Erel et al.'s argument that participatory theatre methods "generate data beyond text and language-based methods" (2017, p. 309 and extends it to the specific domain of oral heritage research. The participatory and dialogical character of Forum Theatre is not an external imposition on African communities but finds analogues in indigenous traditions of community theatre, storytelling, and ritual performance (Ansu-Kyeremeh, 1998; Bame, 1991). In Asebu, the methodology was effective precisely because it was indigenous in spirit if not in formal origin.

***Forum Theatre's Dual Function: Research and Development***

The study confirms Forum Theatre's dual function as both a research instrument and a development praxis, and demonstrates that, in the Asebu context, these two functions were mutually reinforcing. The study reveals Forum Theatre's capacity for communal knowledge validation, a function with particular significance for oral heritage research. In oral tradition communities, knowledge is not individually possessed but communally held and collectively validated (Vansina, 1985). Individual interviews, by extracting testimony from its communal context, necessarily fragment this collective knowledge system.

Forum Theatre creates conditions under which the community can collectively perform, debate, validate, and modify its oral traditions. The self-correcting function observed during Asebu sessions, in which community members interrupted one another to refine or contest elements of the Amenfi narrative, demonstrates Forum Theatre's unique contribution to oral heritage research. Simultaneously, this process served a conscientisation function, enabling community members to

move from passive inheritors of the Amenfi tradition to active, critically aware agents in its preservation and reinterpretation.

This dual function addresses longstanding critiques of extractive research practices in post-colonial contexts (Chambers, 2014; Smith, 2012) and aligns with participatory action research principles that seek to integrate knowledge production with social transformation.

***Implications and Transferability***

The Asebu case has broader implications for Theatre for Development theory and practice in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings contribute to debates on decolonising research methodologies (Abungu & Ndoro, 2023) by demonstrating that Forum Theatre resonates with indigenous African traditions of communal knowledge production. However, the study also identifies important limitations and ethical considerations that must inform future applications.

The tensions among openness and sacredness, community empowerment and outsider facilitation, and heritage documentation and fears of cultural commodification suggest that Forum Theatre-based research requires ongoing ethical negotiation and reflective practice. Researchers must approach oral heritage communities not with predetermined methodological protocols but with the flexibility to adapt to local cultural norms and community concerns.

***Design Principles, Conditions, and Transferability***

Based on the Asebu experience, the following design principles emerge for researchers and practitioners considering Forum Theatre as a participatory heritage research methodology

i. Extended Community Immersion: Forum Theatre cannot be deployed as a one-off intervention. Effective use requires weeks or months of prior community engagement to build trust, understand cultural protocols, and identify appropriate performative anchors. In Asebu, eight weeks of community entry preceded script development.

ii. Grounding in Existing Performance Traditions: Forum Theatre should activate rather than import performative traditions. Researchers must identify the community's existing performance vocabulary, including festivals, songs, rituals, and storytelling practices, and design Forum Theatre sessions that resonate with these forms. In Asebu, the Amenfi oral narrative already circulated through festivals and dirges, providing ready dramatic material.

iii. Community Authorship of Dramatic Content: Community members, not researchers, should author the dramatic material. The researcher's role is facilitation, not direction. In Asebu, community members drew on their own oral knowledge and cultural understanding to generate the script, ensuring cultural authenticity and community ownership.

iv. Negotiated Ethics Around Sacred Knowledge: Researchers must respect community protocols governing sacred or sensitive cultural knowledge. Not all heritage knowledge is appropriate for public performance. In Asebu, ritual knowledge associated with deities and chiefly succession remained protected, and Forum Theatre sessions focused on publicly accessible narratives.

v. Multimodal Documentation Strategies: The performative and embodied nature of Forum Theatre data requires documentation beyond standard audio recording. Video recording, photography, and detailed field notes are essential. Researchers should also develop analytical frameworks capable of engaging with multimodal, non-textual data.

These principles do not constitute a fixed template but provide a framework for intentionally designing Forum Theatre as a research methodology that is both culturally resonant and analytically robust in oral heritage contexts.

Forum Theatre as a heritage research methodology will be most effective in contexts where the following conditions are present

The Asebu case is distinctive in possessing a remarkably coherent founding-hero oral tradition that provided ready dramatic vocabulary for the Forum Theatre process. Forum Theatre as heritage research methodology will be most effective in contexts where

i. The community possesses rich, active performative traditions (festivals, rituals, storytelling)
ii. Oral heritage is collectively held rather than individually possessed
iii. There is community openness to public performance of cultural narratives
iv. Traditional leadership supports participatory research approaches
v. The researcher can commit to extended community immersion (months, not weeks)

**Conclusion**

This paper has examined Forum Theatre as a participatory research methodology for engaging oral heritage communities, drawing on evidence from the Asebu Traditional Area of Ghana. The findings indicate that Forum Theatre offers distinct epistemological, methodological, and ethical advantages over conventional qualitative approaches in oral heritage contexts. Epistemologically, Forum Theatre enables access to embodied, performative, and communal dimensions of knowledge that are not easily captured through interview-based methods. Methodologically, it reconfigures the research encounter from an extractive process into a collaborative and generative one, allowing for communal validation and active engagement with cultural knowledge. Ethically, it responds to concerns about extractive research in postcolonial settings by aligning knowledge production with community participation and cultural continuity.

At the same time, questions of transferability require careful consideration. The Asebu case is characterised by a relatively coherent oral tradition centred on a founding cultural figure, which provided a clear performative anchor for the Forum Theatre process. In contexts where oral heritage is more fragmented or contested, additional preparatory work may be required to identify suitable narrative and performative entry points. This suggests the importance of sustained community engagement and co-design in adapting the methodology to different settings. As oral heritage communities confront increasing pressures from globalisation, urbanisation, and cultural change, the need for research approaches that are both rigorous and participatory becomes more urgent. Forum Theatre, grounded in participatory pedagogy and resonant with indigenous performance traditions, offers a viable model for such work. The Asebu experience suggests that when research methodologies engage with the performative and communal nature of cultural knowledge, they do more than document heritage; they contribute to its continued life and relevance. In this sense, Forum Theatre does not merely generate knowledge about culture; it becomes a means through which communities actively sustain and reinterpret it.

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