

The Value of Oral Tradition to a Researcher of African Historiography

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Abstract

Despite the fact that oral traditions have been treated with contempt and intellectual disdain by Eurocentric scholars and writers in the past, evidences available and utilized by African scholars have shown that the use of oral traditions have contributed immensely to the reconstruction and value of African historiography. While some criticisms were obscurantist in their approach, others did not see the African as one that has gone through changes. Yet until very recently, the histories of the continent, its cultural patterns and even the potential of its people have been the subject of monumental distortions, ridicule and amusement among the intellectual community.

The purpose of this work is to raise some questions about the authenticity of its use as a vital source and make some suggestions about their collection and use in African historical reconstruction in order to stimulate its better use, adaptation and functionality to contemporary scholars of African historiography. In the study, attempt have been made to put the records straight by towing the line of argument that scholars of African origin has utilized oral traditions in the reconstruction of the histories of several localities not only in Nigeria but in Africa as a whole.

While highlighting problems associated with the use of oral traditions, the work has been able to suggest that the most hopeful direction in which oral tradition studies needs to go is to strengthen their interdisciplinary base. Such an interdisciplinary team work within the framework of which oral tradition could be collected would involve anthropologists, archeologist, linguists and scholars of oral literature working cooperatively and carefully with local historians over a long period. The result of such academic exercises would be multi-dimensional and result oriented as a result of the combination of the various faculties to check the limitations that could arise from a single researcher's effort and on the whole make the work more beneficial and valuable to people generally.

Introduction

No doubt, a number of scholarly works have been done on oral traditions or achieved through the use of oral traditions over the years. In order to have a proper understanding of the subject matter, it may be reasonable to review some relevant literature to put us in the right perspective. The first set of African scholars who started the use of the methodology of data-gathering crusade from traditional sources dates back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At this time, educated Africans came to place increasing emphasis on the use of indigenous, traditional sources of information as a crucial tool in the reconstruction of the African past. Blyden's *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* belong to this category of Scholarship. James Africanus Horton of Sierra Leone, Reindorf and Sarbah of Ghana, Samuel Johnson and Otunba Payne of Nigeria, and Cheikh Anta Diop of Senegal, are among the better known of these Africans who battled through their works to keep alive a true appreciation of the authentic past of West African peoples. Their work was reinforced by the labours of folk historians. In Nigeria, one can easily recall the work of B. Losi's *History of Lagos*, Jacob Egharevba's *History of Benin*, William Moore's *History of Itsekiri*, and Kanu Umoh's *History of Aro Settlements*.¹

After these set of early historians, came the professional historians who were actually trained academically. The flag-bearers among these professional historians in Nigeria were Kenneth Dike and S.O Biobaku who first called out for recourse to oral traditions. Dike visited Bonny and a few places in the Niger Delta, but used oral traditions to an appreciable degree in his major work, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885* published in 1956.² But he realized the inadequacies of relying solely on the written sources which were external in origin and external in their orientation. A great deal of Dike's appeal at the time related to his exposure of inadequacies of the external approach to African history, and therefore the need for internal resources and orientation. Biobaku's *The Egba and their Neighbours*, also published by Oxford in 1957 made use of oral traditions in addition to material in the British Public Records Office in London. Biobaku also wrote some papers on oral tradition.³ Both Dike and Biobaku later directed schemes for the recovery of local history

¹ Walter I. Ofonagoro, "Reappraisals in History: The West African Content," in O. Erim and Okon Uya, *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History*, (Fourth Dimension Publishing Company, Enugu, 1984), 18.

² K. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885*, London, Oxford University Press, 1956.

³ S.O. Biobaku, "The problem of traditional history, with Special Reference to Yoruba tradition," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1956, 43-47; "The Yoruba Historical Research Scheme," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1956, 59-60; H.F.C. Smith, "The Benin Study," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol. 1, No.

through interdisciplinary study in the Benin and Yoruba historical research schemes. Other Nigerians have utilized oral traditions to produce valuable historical works. Afigbo has collected and analyzed legends of origin among the Efik and the Aro.¹ Shelton's study of the relations between the Nsukka Igbo and the Igala depended heavily on the oral traditions of the two polities.² Alagoa did find some aspects of the oral traditions of the Niger Delta peoples useful in the reconstruction and interpretation of their early history.³ Low's book on *Three Nigerian Emirates* was based entirely on oral tradition or rather Oral History. The division between them is rather a question of semantics than of substance.⁴

The study of oral tradition as academic activity received a shot in the arm with the entry of Jan Vlasina. Vlasina's contribution first came to public notice with his article in the first number of the *Journal of African History*, in 1960, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba." In it, he made a brief statement of the merits of oral traditions and the need for a systematic recording and analysis, followed by an account of his own work among the Kuba of the Congo. His seminal theoretical work on the subject was published in French in 1961, but was only translated into English and published in Chicago in 1965 as *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*.⁵ Yet it was no short term effort. Several years were spent investigating, recording and studying traditions from over 1,400 sources.⁶ Twenty years after this research, and after the findings had been published, Vlasina felt it necessary to re-examine the traditions. Other researches among neighboring people had revealed that Kuba traditions of origin and migrations were unreliable historical indicators though valuable for a study of deeply held world views. On the other hand, he also found that a review of the traditions gave him more evidence than he had gained from his original analysis.⁷ His other publications include books using oral traditions to reconstruct the history of African communities, mainly in the Congo region (Zaire). His most recent works are *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo 1880-1892* (London, 1973), and *The Children of Woot: A History of the Kuba People* (Madison, 1978). Vlasina multiplied his influence in the development of oral traditional studies by teaching at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, and producing a continuing stream of young scholars able to make their own original contributions.

Substantial work in the collection of oral tradition and its use in the reconstruction of the early history of peoples and kingdoms have been done in East Africa in the sixties, and seventies, following the work of Ogot.⁸ But in West Africa, not much has been done in the publication of substantial works, although there are some materials from younger scholars in the form of unpublished theses and dissertations. Alagoa's work of systematic collection and analysis of Ijo oral tradition was published in 1972.⁹ Thereafter, several other works of importance has been done especially by the likes of Prof. Erim O. Erim, *Perspectives and Method of Studying African History*, T.N Tamuno, *History and History Makers in Modern Nigeria*, R.A Adeleye, *Power and Diplomacy in Northern Nigeria 1804-1906*, Walter Ofonagoro, *Reappraisals in History: The West African Contest*, Anthony I. Asiwaju, *History and National Awareness*, B.A. Ogot, *Towards a History of Kenya*, Gabriel O. Olusanya, *African Historians and the Pan Africanist* and Caroline Neale's authoritative compilation in a book entitled *African Historiography 1960-1980*.

Having reviewed pertinently relevant literature thus far, it must at once be very clear to us that oral traditions occupy a special place among the various kinds of historical sources to researchers of African historiography. John C. Miller has defined Oral tradition as a narrative describing, or purporting to describe, eras before the time of the person who relates it.¹⁰ This definition of oral tradition differs slightly from the conventional one, which terms 'traditions' any spoken report removed by even a single previous telling from a direct eyewitness account. That definition stresses the fact of 'transmission' by word of mouth from one person to another. Oral tradition are simply messages which are but unwritten, their preservation entrusted to the

1, 1956, 60-61.

¹ A.E. Afigbo, "The Aro of Southern Nigeria: a Socio-Historical Analysis of Legends of their Origin" Part I: *African Notes* 6, 2 (1971), 31-46; Part II: 91-106.

"Efik origins and Migrations Reconsidered," *Nigeria Magazine* 87 (1965), 267-280.

² A.J. Shelton, "Onojo Oboni: Problem of Identification and Historicity in the Oral Traditions of the Igala and Northern Nsukka Igbo of Nigeria," *Journal of African Folklore* 81, 321 (1968), 243-247.

³ E.J. Alagoa, "Songs as Historical Data; Examples from the Niger Delta," *Research Review* (Legon) 5, 1 (1968), 1- 16.

⁴ V.E. Chikwendu, "Oral Tradition and Archeological Reconstruction," in O. Erim and Okon Uya, *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History* (Fourth Dimension Publishing Company, Enugu, 1984), 64.

⁵ Jan Vlasina, *De la tradition orale: Essai de methods Historique*. Annals du Musee Royal de l'Afrique central, Sciences Humanies, No. 36. Tervuren, 1961. Translated into English by H.M. Wright, as *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965): "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 1, 1960, 45-54, 257-270.

⁶ Jan Vlasina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba, I. Methods," *Journal of African History*, I. 1 (1960), 47.

⁷ Jan Vlasina, "Comment: Traditions of Genesis," *Journal of African History*, XV, 2 (1974), 320, passim.

⁸ B.A. Ogot, *History of the Southern Luo: Migration and Settlement 1500-1900* (Nairobi, 1967).

⁹ E.J. Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta: An Historical Interpretation of Ijo Oral Tradition* (Ibadan, 1972).

¹⁰ Joseph C. Miller, *The African Past Speaks*, Dawson & Sons Press Ltd., Kent, England, 1980, 2.

memories of successive generations of people. Oral traditions are documents of the present because they are told in the present.¹ On the other hand, historiography is conceived as the discipline dealing with the methods of writing history and the techniques of historical investigation. It is the writing of History based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials, and the synthesis of particulars into a narrative that will stand in the test of critical methods. Historiography is thus a narrower and much less interesting study than History itself. This is because it involves the study of the writing of History itself and synonymous with historical methodology-the actual process which the historian at work goes through.² Prof. O. Omosini has posited that apart from Archeology and Anthropology, other disciplines like linguistics, paleontology, diplomacy, logic, reference to approaches, theories, models and genre, systems model, panegyric literature dialectical materialism have all served useful purposes for historiography.³

Typologies of Oral Traditional Sources

Two major classifications of oral tradition will suffice for our attention; communications that present news and secondly, communication which represents an interpretation of existing situations. The essence of news is to give information about something that happened not long ago and is not known to one's audience. The news must be of some interest and often possess some sensational value. The main point is that such communication do not concern the past, but rather the present and imply a future. Such information comes from eyewitnesses, hearsay or internal experience such as visions, dreams or hallucinations are quite common perception. In oral societies, such occurrences were and are frequent. A prophecy about the coming of the Europeans in the Rwandese tradition translates historical consciousness. The dream of king Dingiswayo, which ordered him to bring peace through universal conquest, legitimizes ex post facto-the Zulu (Natal) imperialism of his age⁴.

The second aspect of oral tradition deals with the interpretation of experience and this includes personal reminiscences, etiological commentaries on existing objects (iconatroph), linguistic expressions (folk etymology), traditions (explanatory glosses, and literary expressions of experience such as occur in oral arts. Reminiscences are perhaps the most typical product of human memory. Produced by questions or not, they primarily are the recollections of past events or situations given by participants long after the events. The African Historiography, by being sensitive to motion of personality and to the requirements of memory in given cultures, can often acquire a good insight of the gap between the past as it may have been and its rendering. The internal consisting of a life history will allow one to find the principles of selection which link individual reminiscences and hence to evaluate their impact on each reminiscences.⁵

Other sub-categorization are historical gossips which are all sorts of news and hearsays generated as events occur and communicated, personal tradition which are family accounts and the group accounts which are the typical "oral tradition" of many authors. They are the oral memories of groups such as villages, chiefdom, kingdoms, associations and various kingship groups. Tradition of origin and Genesis also is an important aspect of Oral Tradition sources to a researcher of African historiography. Every community in the world has a representation of the origin of the world, the creation of mankind and the appearance of their own particular society and community. Such traditions of origin or genesis are what anthropologists' term myths. An epic is also a class of traditions on its own a narrative couched in poetic language, subject to special linguistic rules of form. Usually epics contain hundreds or thousands of verses and present a complex tale of wonders and heroism centered on a main personage. Many epics have historical values as most of the heroes really existed.

Tales, proverbs and wise sayings also provide another rentable source for the researcher of African historiography. Like most sources of history, tales contain material of very mixed age and parentage and should be cautiously selected by the researcher to determine what is real.

Proverbs and wise sayings or famous last words heroes usually sum up program events which sharpen the punch line are readily appreciated by people.

"The ocean is the border of my ricefield", send king Andriampoi ni merina, thus laying down a program for his heir to conquer all of Madagascar.

Conceptual Clarifications

Having classified types of oral traditions, a working definition must be necessary. Oral traditions may be defined as verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation. This definition specifies that the message must be oral statement spoken, sung or called out on musical instruments only. The definition also makes clear that all oral sources are not oral traditions. There must be transmission by word of

¹ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965).

² Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, Macmillan Press Limited, 1979, 16.

³ Olufemi Omosini, *Evolution of African Historiography: An Overview* (OAU Press, 1991), 11.

⁴ J. D. Omer-Cooper "The Mfecane and the Great Trek" in J.C. Anene and G.N. Brown (eds) *Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1966, 361.

⁵ Joseph C. Miller, *The African Past Speaks*, Dawson & Sons Press Ltd., Kent, England, 1980, 13.

mouth over at least a generation. Sources for oral history are therefore not included. On the other hand, the definition does not claim that oral tradition must be “about the past” or that they are just narratives. They encompass all the classes that we have described above.

Such a definition does not rally all categories. Henige would add a further restriction, namely that they should be commonly or universally known in a given culture¹. Versions that are not widely known, he states should rightfully be considered as “testimony”. This distinction is unnecessary here, and it’s preferable rather to use “testimony” in its widest sense as “evidence about something”. Henige would stress that traditions represent common historical consciousness, and while this is a crucial criterion for any sociological analysis of traditions, it is not for use as a source for history. J.C Miller restricts traditions only to conscious historical statements: The person who tells them wants to communicate the past to us². And in practice the same author seems to imply that such statements must be narrative. He further argues that the heart of such statements consists of stereotypes or clichés which remain very stable over time in his view and are the genuine unchanged formation that the historian must decode. But his view is far too restrictive. Traditions need not be clichés or narratives, nor is the conscious intent to testify about the past necessary. Much can be learned from the past from oral sources that are not concerned with the past and hence testify despite themselves. Indeed, that characteristic makes them more reliable precisely because they are unconscious contributions.

Obviously, as “Miller has noted this definition is a working definition for the use of historians. Sociologists, linguists, or scholars of verbal art propose their own, which in the first case (sociology) might well stress common knowledge, in the second features that distinguish the language from common dialogue (linguists), and in the last features of form and content that define art (folklorists). Such specialists normally will be much less impressed by the importance of oral transmission over time than historians will be”³. Indeed, in practice oral history is fused with oral tradition.

Distinction between Oral Historiography and Oral Traditions

The term “Oral historiography” and “Oral tradition” have often been used as synonyms by contemporary writers. Since this should not be so, a clarification is necessary at least to indicate their application in this discussion. Oral tradition refers to past human actions reported through speech and handed down from generation to generation. Oral historiography, on the other hand, is the reconstruction of human history based on Oral tradition. Oral tradition suffered for keeping the records of past human actions for all societies before writing was developed. In Europe, Oral historiography prevailed until the “scientific revolution split philosophy into its component parts”⁴. In Africa where pervasive written documentation had not been the norm, written forms have been juxtaposed an Oral forms⁵. Oral tradition which forms the bedrock of Oral historiography is, therefore, central to the writing of African history. We shall now discuss the methods of Oral historiography and attempt to situate oral tradition in African historiography.

Much of oral historiography involves primary data collection. It is, therefore, mainly based on field work. In this enterprise, the researcher is confronted with oral data in their basic forms of transmission. Before moving into the field, the researcher tries to obtain whatever information he can on the society which he is about to work on. In the field proper, his approach is question-asking (interviewing). These interviews are recorded in either of the following ways: writing, tape-recording, film or video-recording and photographing. The major handicap of writing is that in many cases, the researcher is not at ease with the local language, especially its orthography. Tape-recording provides only sound and the historian may misplace references to material objects. Equally true is that tape-recording cannot capture dramatic and melodramatic antics of informants and narrators. Photographs are useful but it demands the good memory of the researcher to relate the objects to what he has been told in the field. Generally, motion photography (film or video) is preferred in the sense that it replays the scenes of the interview and captures those dramatic and melodramatic acts that sometimes accompany traditions. But it has the important disadvantage of filming only those places the camera lens is directed to. After field work, the researcher transcribes his oral data. This involves verbatim writing down of oral accounts in the original language⁶.

¹ David Henige, *The Disease of Writing: Gander and Nyoro Kinglists in Newly Literate World in The African Past Speaks*, Dawson & Sons Press Ltd., Kent, England, 1980, - Oral Historiography, 2.

² J.C Miler “Listening, for the African Past” in *The African Past Speaks* Dawson & Sons Press Ltd., Kent, England, 1980, 2. “Oral tradition is a narrative describing or purporting to describe eras before the time of the person who relates it.

³ Joseph C. Miller, *The African Past Speaks*, Dawson New York, 1980, 13.

⁴ See Dike and Ajayi, “African Historiography,” in David Sills (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Vol. 5 and 6). In that article, the authors used the term “oral tradition” throughout.

⁵ GI Jones’ assertion that, in this un-avoidable circumstance, only “a hypothetical reconstruction” is feasible is contentious. See his *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers* (O.U.P., 1963), Introduction.

⁶ According to Prof. Omosini, these forms of transmission fall into two broad categories-fixed text and free text. The former is preserved in the exact words and must be rehearsed verbatim. It includes titles, slogans, incantations, proverbs, riddles and

Having discussed, albeit briefly, some of the methods of oral historiography, it is worthwhile to appraise this historiographical approach in the light of prevailing controversies. Some historians, especially the Eurocentric “builders of civilization” have sharply criticized oral tradition, the very bastion of oral historiography and African history. Their manners of criticism have differed but their theme remains the same. How can one evaluate Robert Lowie’s assertion, for instance, that

“I cannot attach to oral traditions any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever”¹, or Hegel’s Here (in the European World) we deal with people who knew who they were and what they wanted. Observed and observable reality is a more solid foundation for history than the transience of myths and epics. Once a people have achieved firm individuality such forms (oral tradition) cease to be its historical essence.²

Professor Omosini clearly observes that the reasons adduced by critics of oral tradition include weakness of human memory and inaccurate chronology hence the term “dateless history”. They also allege that oral tradition is normally inclined to the political structure in which it operates, hence gives validity to the establishment of the day and a charter to the rights and privileges which it claims. These defects of Oral tradition, from the perspective of most African historians, seem to be exaggerated. In considering these criticisms, he advises therefore, that care should be taken to sift actual shortcomings from bias. Indeed, the weakness of human memory is notable. But then oral tradition does not depend on the ability of a single person to remember. Hence any alteration made on it would depend on the general structure of the people in question and these peoples have evolved mechanisms for preserving traditions.³

The most common mechanism is the frequency with which these traditions are rendered in literary forms, for example, initiation ceremonies; masquerade displays; praise names and praise songs; rituals; coronations and funerals. These carry historical information and replenish a people’s memory as regularly and as periodically as they occur. Furthermore, certain families and sections take a special interest in ensuring that their forebears and the events in which they had participated are not left out of reckoning. Since there is a possibility, indeed a tendency, for people to “drift”, severe sanctions are exacted on whoever selfishly misinterprets, or shows lack of expertise in traditions. In some cases, sanctions are believed to be applied not by man, but by the gods. There are also sanctions of public opinion, but in other cases, punishment could be as severe as the death penalty.

Omosini further pointed out that African communities have laws against falsification and that they have specialist oral historians. It takes a long time, for instance, for one to specialize in the *Ifa* divination poetry and become a *Babalawo* or *Arokin* court historian, in Yorubaland. The same applies to the making of the *griot* in Senegambia or the *Alakun* of Idoma. The services of these specialist historians are complemented by the existence and activities of secret societies such as the *Ogboni* of Yorubaland, the *Ekpe/Mboko* of the Aro and Ibibio communities of Eastern Nigeria, and the masquerade groups like the *Onyekuru* and *Ajikwu* in Igboland who keep custody of particular traditions⁴. Archaeological sources have attested to the authenticity of oral accounts. For example, artifacts recovered from archaeological excavations in the Niger Delta have confirmed the oral traditions of the peoples of the area.⁵ But, perhaps, the most important aspect of preservation of oral tradition in Africa is the fact that everybody sees tradition as crucial to his or her place in society and lays claim to its knowledge.⁶ This general concern and commitment to tradition guarantees a measure of sanctity.

Again, even if, as critics claim, at the turn of every regime and dynasty, there is a concerted effort to blend oral tradition, it does not automatically follow that it changes totally because the elements of the preceding dynasties or regimes (as the case may be) would preserve it in one form or the other. In other words, tradition can still be maintained even if it appears unfavorable to a power elite. One reason for this is that power is often shared: A power elite may include elements from other rival lineages that cling to their traditional posts as a result of the monopoly they had established earlier on in the history of the people.

praise names. The latter, which is the more common form, reckons with the content of message of a particular tradition, e.g. folk tale, myths and legends.

¹ Robert Lowie, *Oral Tradition and History*, Journal of American Folklore, 161-67. See also David Henige, *Oral Historiography*, London, 1982, 7. *The Chronology of Oral Tradition: Quest for a Chimera*, Oxford University Press, 1974.

² See G.W.F Hegel, *Reason in History*, translated by R. Hartman, (The Bobbs-Mercill Co. Inc., 1953), 3.

³ O. Omosini, *Evolution of African Historiography: An Overview* (OAU Press, 1991), 11.

⁴ Ibid. 11.

⁵ E.J Alagoa, *A History of the Niger Delta* (Ibadan University Press, 1972).

⁶ It should be noted that not all popular versions are reliable. See, for instance, the numerous claims of peoples whose founders allegedly came “from the sky” or “from the sea”.

It is here noteworthy that, irrespective of political structure, there is some neutrality existing in oral literary societies which keeps and reinforces traditions for a long time.

Oral Traditions as a Source of History

These are any piece(s) of historical information transmitted by words of mouth from person to person. Oral sources are usually in two categories: Eye witness account and Second-hand narratives. While, the former consist of oral testimonies given by those who witnessed the events proper, the latter are testimonies about events which the informants did not witness themselves. Oral traditions are past human actions reported through speech and passed down from one generation to the other. At this junction, it is pertinent that we distinguish between oral tradition and historiography, two terms often erroneously used as synonyms. While, oral tradition is the totality of past human actions reported through speech and passed down from one generation to the other, oral historiography is the reconstruction of past human actions reported through the use of oral traditions. Therefore, historiography is a much more advanced scholarly historical effort than the oral traditions. Ernst Bergheim classifies oral sources to the following; Narrative, Legends, Anecdotes, Proverbs, Historical lays etc. On the other hand, D. F McCall, another historian classifies oral traditions into, Myths, Aetiology, Stories and entertainment stories i.e tales by the moonlight. Philips Stevens groups them into: myths, legends, songs and popular history.¹ While, Jan Vansina, obviously one of the most celebrated scholar of oral traditions categorized oral traditions into five main classes; Formulae, Poetry, Tales, List and Commentaries.²

Oral tradition is an indispensable source of Nigerian history. The Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo people who could not write nor read before the arrival of the Europeans at the shores of Nigeria preserved their histories through carefully kept and jealously guarded traditions. Indeed, several amateur and professional historians have successfully used oral traditions to reconstruct the history of various Nigeria peoples. Examples of such historians are: Reverend Samuel Johnson, A. I Akinjogbin, S.O Biobaku, Kenneth O. Dike and E.J Alagoa etc.

The central place that oral tradition occupies in the reconstruction on Nigerian history notwithstanding, it is fraught with many problems, some of which are stated below: The first problem concerns the very method of spontaneous transmission which often than most times results into distortion as they are handed down from one generation to the other, secondly, oral tradition lacks precise dating especially with regards to the very distant past. Thirdly, the frailty of the human mind is another big problem in the process of recounting the versions of past stories. Fourthly, oral traditions often lack objectivity and normally incline to the political structure in which they operate; hence they give validity to the establishment of the day and a charter to the rights, privileges and position which it claims. For example, much emphasis is given to eponymous figures or heroes who are thought to have made much impact at the expense of others. As a result of these and other limitations some historians especially the Euro centric builders of civilization have sharply criticized oral tradition as the bastion of oral historiography and African history. The primary reasons for their criticisms are that oral tradition is not a scientific source of history.

However, in favour of this argument of the debate on the authenticity of the use of oral tradition as defective, Prof. Atanda asserts that the defect in most African traditions seem to have been grossly exaggerated by the Western/ White Scholars. Hence, he advises that actual short comings should be sifted from biases. For example, he argues that the weakness or frailty of human memory as a limitation of oral tradition is notable but then he argues that oral tradition does not depend on the ability of a single source to remember the events in question. Hence, any altercation made on it would have to depend on the general structure of the people in question as pre- history Nigerian peoples over the years evolved mechanisms for preserving and relating traditions.³

Oral traditions are indispensable to the reconstruction and writing of African history. Most of what has transformed into well-kept history of today were sourced from oral traditions. Republic historical such as Prof. Akinjogbon S.O Biobaku, Kenneth O. Dike and E.J Alagoa has successfully used oral traditions to reconstruct the history of various Nigerian peoples. There were also those who motivated by the need to preserve their culture produced book and pamphlets on their local history and customs-men like, Samuel Johnson, Jacob Egharevba, Apollo Hamphate Bain, G.I Olomola, Kagwa in Uganda and Bourbon Hama in Niger.

As a result of these and other limitations, some historians especially the Eurocentric builders of civilization, have sharply criticized oral tradition, as the bastion of oral historiography and African history. The basis of their argument being that oral tradition is not a scientific source of history. For example, Lord Raglan argues that historical construction is impossible without literacy. Also, Bronislaw Malinowski, a polish born British anthropologist asserts that oral tradition are fabricated to serve selfish or group interests, while Robert Lowie's main objection against the use of traditions as history was that such tradition often deal with

¹ D.F McCall, *Africa in Time Perspective*, Boston 1964.

² Jan Vansina, "Comment: Traditions of Genesis," *Journal of African History*, XV, 2 (1974), 320, passim.

³ Atanda J.A, *The New Oyo Empire*, Preface, Humanities Press, New York.

insignificant items, while events of great importance were not remembered¹.

However, as Jan Vansina has pointed out, traditions about events are only kept because the events were thought to be important or significant. The process of selection which starts from eyewitnesses and as time passes, the criteria of importance or significance changes. The importance accorded to events is a matter of general consensus in a community and as such to the researcher of African historiography, the use of oral tradition will continue to be of immense value in the continuous process of reconnecting history.

Values of Oral Traditions

Despite all the criticisms on the authenticity of oral traditions, the value of oral tradition to a researcher of historiography cannot be underestimated. For example, in Islam, the oral traditions relating to the sayings of the prophet have canonical value as Hadith and these statements have been evaluated since the second century AD, by an examination of the links in the chain of transmission. The possibility of transmission, the reliability and quality of each intervening witness between the first, the companion of the prophet and the recorder were all evaluated and hadith were accepted or rejected or kept in abeyance on the basis of the results. This methodology describes aptly the manner in which a researcher of African historiography should make use of oral traditions.

Prof. Omosini in one of his works noted that defects of oral tradition from the perspective of most African historians seem to have been grossly exaggerated; hence care must be taken while considering these criticisms, so that actual shortcomings are sifted from bias. Citing the frailty of human memory as one criticism, he asserts that oral tradition does not depend on the ability of a single person to remember as researchers have to depend on an alteration made out of the general structure. Since the African views History as a continuum consisting of a past, and a present and a future, all inseparably linked together, no doubt, the use of oral tradition as a source of area value of research for historiography would continue to be of immense value.

It must also be pointed out that the multidisciplinary approach to the study of African history is imperative; because each discipline has a unique contribution to make to the process of reconstructing the African past. It is therefore necessary for the researcher of African historiography to equip himself with the knowledge that would make the cross-fertilization between the other sources of history-written sources, Archeology, Arabic source, material resources man-made or natural object such as shrines and groves. Other sources that may be juxtaposed with the use of oral tradition are Archeology, linguistic, cultural, anthropology, ethology, ethnography, numismatics, epigraphy and comparative philology. For example, Thusrtan Shaw used Nri oral traditions to reconstruct his excavations at Igbo-Ukwu. Finally, he produced an artist's impression of how the priest-king could have been buried-in a sitting position with his paraphernalia of office laid out around him².

Also, in Ugwuagu site 2, A.E Afigbo's excavations yielded many artifacts which would have been very difficult to interpret but for oral tradition and ethnographic practices. For example, he noted that there are small U-shaped pottery vessels with rim diameter of less than 5 cm in the assemblage. According to him, his first reaction was that the vessels were not functional but ritual because of their very small nature. It was not until he interviewed old people in Ugwuagu and Amizu communities that cultural significance of the artifacts became clear. Presently, it is called *chi* (meaning personal god). It is also the preserve of women. It is usually lodged into the foot of the house wall where the eldest male of the family offers the appropriate sacrifice and libations at appointed days of the year.³

Oral traditions also helped throw more light on the interpretation of other items in the assemblage, viz, a bone spatula, stone rubbers, knife-razors, etc. It finally aided me in choosing the criteria for the classification of nearly 22,000 pots and potsherds which were recovered from the site. It may also be stated that oral traditions are multi-vocal: the offer leads to the archeologists; insight into cultures, values to the anthropologists, text for the linguists and add further information about the past for researchers and historians. More importantly, oral traditions speak for the people.

Conclusion

Therefore to reconcile all the afore-said, as Prof. Richard Olaniyan has pointed out; what is essential to the use of oral traditions is that the researcher must be familiar with the culture, the social and political structure and the thought systems of the community in which he is working⁴. Arthur Marwick asserts that a researcher should also ask himself: does it accord with other known facts; how reliable/authentic is it?⁵ Up till now, there are still old

¹ Malinowski, B, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, London: 1950.

² Shaw T. "The Teacher and Archeology South of the Sahara' in J. C. Anene and G.N. Brown (eds) *African in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Ibadan, Ibadan University Press, 1966.

³ A.E. Afigbo, "The Aro of Southern Nigeria: a Socio-Historical Analysis of Legends of their Origin" Part I: *African Notes* 6, 2 (1971), 31-46; Part II: 91-106.

⁴ Richard Olaniyan, *African History and Culture: An Overview in African History and Culture*, Longman Nigerian Limited, Ikeja, Lagos Nigeria, 1982, 4.

⁵ Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History*, Macmillan Press Limited, 1979, 144-145

men and women who are versed in the ancient lore of their people. As among the Yorubas of Nigeria and in Dahomi, such oral tradition custodians and traditional Court (of the kings) historians whose job is to memorize and recite on occasions their traditions are still relevant sources for historiography.

S.P M'bra Ekanza suggest that the use of these sources of traditions in History-maxims, proverbs, stone inscriptions must be used with reference to its antecedents. Further, he prescribes that such custodians of oral traditions must be appeased in order to get the real truth from them. For as he observes, "History is the life and property of the ancestors and libation is a means of obtaining clearance for communion with them and this may involve the offer of a bottle of gin or alcohol depending on the indigenous practice of those consulted."¹

Yet as a source of historical information in the pre-literate, colonial and even indeed contemporary African communities, where written sources cannot be taken as sufficiently comprehensive or reliable, oral tradition must be given special consideration and of immense value for the reconstruction of earlier histories. Any African History which underestimates oral tradition or which relies exclusively on written documents not only diminishes as one penetrates deeper into the past, which may at times be poor in content. It is no longer disputable that various African countries preserve aspects of their tradition in their myths, proverbs: poetry ritual recitations, tales and music; when used with proper care and according to rigorous standards, these are legitimate and reliable sources of information.

With increasing usage and improvements in methods, the usual problem associated with oral tradition-problems of collection, chronology, documentation and interpretation should be resolved by the conscientious researchers of African historiography. Also, the efficacy of the multi-disciplinary and resort to other sources of history for cross-checking have produced enormous results-for example, the increasing competence of archeologist through radio carbon dating of artifacts has been able to support the chronological problems of the "long ago" of oral traditions and such should be resorted to by a researcher in the process of working on a particular case study of historiography.

Also, E.A Afigbo suggests that a cardinal point of historiography is not to put an unfair question to a source, no matter what the source is. For instance, since the conception and arrangement of time in non-literate society are different from the conception and arrangement line in literate Western Society, it is a violation of this principle to put to the oral tradition of a non-literate African Society questions about datation and chronology which presuppose answers that make sense only against the Gregorian calendric scale². Historians must also go out deliberately, indeed aggressively and even provocatively to break the methodological stranglehold design or otherwise, on the business of writing the history of the preliterate acephalous societies of Africa. Historians working in this field must cultivate a consciousness of the historiographical tendencies of the age-especially as these affects the segmentary societies. It is necessary to constantly remind researchers that much as oral traditions could be enriched by thorough cross-checking and supplementation with archeological, linguistic and other sources, the value of oral tradition as a source of history is independent of these ancillary techniques.

More importantly, a researcher should strive to write history which is as close an approximation to their own experience as is possible within the sources and techniques available to us. Thus, in the last analysis is the ultimate ambition of history whether conceived as an art or science. In keeping with this ultimate objective of history, we must ensure that the questions which we put to the oral traditions of any society are consistent with the intent and concern of the people's perception of their world. Oral traditions, in spite of the limitations of precision and definiteness, offer a valuable historical insight in that they are very rich tapestry images that present simultaneously diversified perspectives of past events, characters and episodes³. The beauty and source of the value of oral traditions is that they present diverse view points which together can give a total comprehensive picture close to the original facts or state of affairs long forgotten. They invest the past with an imaginative concreteness that is beyond the precisions of modern historiography and anthropology. Hence they serve in profound manner in filling great gaps in our knowledge of the past.⁴

¹ S.P M'bra Ekanza, Oral Tradition and the Writing of History, in *Oral Tradition and Oral History in Africa and the Diaspora: Theory and Practice*, E.J Alagoa (ed.).

² A.E. Afigbo, "The Aro of Southern Nigeria: a Socio-Historical Analysis of Legends of their Origin" Part I: *African Notes* 6, 2 (1971), 31-46; Part II: 91-106.

³ F.B.O Akporobaro, African Oral Traditions, Truth and the Creative Imagination, in *Oral Tradition and Oral History in Africa and the Diaspora: Theory and Practice*, E.J Alagoa (ed.).

⁴ *Ibid.*

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