

THE ROLE OF ORAL TRADITIONS IN AFRICAN HISTORY

By

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Abstract

Colonial historians writing on Africa believed that before colonization, Africa had no history. Whenever they wrote about Africa, they wrote own imaginations with no respect for the African past. Africans were less or never consulted in the making or remaking of their history. Their past was therefore left uncaptured because historians could not trust African's word of mouth, which they labelled as superstitious, biased and lacking evidence. I argue for a reconstruction of pre-literate African history from oral traditions. Historical poems and songs that relate to events and depict society's politics and social values must be revisited. Chiefs' genealogies and lists of place names that facilitate the study of migrations, demography and political developments of past societies, are more important now than ever because of conflicts tearing Africa apart. Tales reflecting milestones and religions must be understood in the way they contribute to national stability and identity in contemporary Africa.

Introduction

Eurocentric historians writing about Africa strongly believed that before colonisation Africa had no history. They dismissed the existence of an African history since the African societies did not have any writing. One such historian, Hugh Trevor-Roper declared that in Africa only the European colonisers' activities were fit subjects for proper history- "the rest is darkness and darkness is not the subject of history."¹ Africans were never consulted in the reconstruction of their history because the historian did not trust their word of mouth, which he labelled as superstitious and lacking evidence.

This paper argues for a reconstruction of pre –literate African societies' history from oral traditions. In oral societies all oral traditions had specific functions. Such functions shed light on the ways of life of the societies concerned, thus making it possible for the historian to reconstruct the society's history. Historical poems and songs that relate to events such as deeds of rulers and wars and depict society's politics and social values need to be revisited. Chiefs' genealogies and lists of place names that facilitate the study of migrations, demography and political developments of past societies are more important now than in the past because of ethnic related conflicts tearing Africa apart. Tales reflecting a society's milestones and its religion need to be understood as they contribute to national stability and identity in Africa.

However, the historian should be aware of oral traditions' weaknesses. It is posited in this paper that the flaws can be overcome and therefore are no reason for denigrating the value

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of oral traditions as historical sources. Oral traditions usually extend less than five centuries in the past.² To overcome the limitation, the historian can get supplementary information from auxiliary disciplines. Functionalists regard oral traditions as charters for current institutions. Clan or family oral traditions and recourse to outside sources can verify official oral traditions' authenticity. Lack of chronology makes some critics dismiss oral traditions as sources of history. Nevertheless, historians have ways of establishing chronology from oral traditions. Furthermore, a word of caution is given to the researcher who collects oral traditions. Correct interpretation of oral tradition is necessary. To accomplish that, the historian must be familiar with the culture in which the oral traditions flourish. The researcher should also carry out external and internal criticism of the oral traditions. Once the above tasks are done, the historian can produce an authentic history of the society whose oral traditions he/she has collected.

Definition

Jan Vansina defines oral traditions as verbal messages, which are statements from the past beyond the present generations, and emphasises that the messages must be oral statements spoken or sung.³ These recollections from the past should be commonly known in a given society and should be transmitted over a period longer than the contemporary generation. Joseph C. Miller refers to an oral tradition as a "narrative describing or purporting to describe eras before the time of the person who relates it."⁴ According to Dioulde Laya the oral tradition is the whole of all testimony types verbally transmitted by a people on their past.⁵ This paper will use Vansina's definition as it encompasses the ideas expressed by the other authors and also explains how the messages are transmitted.

Types of Oral Traditions and their uses as historical sources

In oral societies of pre-colonial Africa all oral traditions had social functions as they were meant to transmit everything vital to a society.⁶ So the historian can decipher from the oral traditions important information about the societies concerned. According to Finnegan, historical poems and songs are intended to pass onto the next generation an account of important events as well as to glorify deeds of rulers and their ancestors⁷. Wars and death of famous men are some of the themes of historical poems and songs which are often composed for propaganda purposes. From the poetry and songs, historians can learn about the political events and attitudes of the society concerned. War poetry can also reflect the values relating to war.⁸ Songs are particularly useful to the historian as reliable records of events since they are not generally amenable to alteration because of their wide exposure.

Praise poetry is meant to record the praise names, the victories and glorious qualities of the chief and his ancestors. To the historian such poems are a source of information about social values and ideals prevalent at the time when they were composed⁹. For instance, Zulu praise poetry reflects that the Zulu have always emphasised military exploits. Religious poetry refers to hymns and prayers that are performed on ritual occasions such as praying for rain and ceremonies to do with initiation, marriage or death¹⁰. So information about changes in religion can be deciphered from such poetry.

Vansina asserts that lists of place names, king lists and genealogies form an official tradition intended as a historical record to benefit the posterity of the society concerned¹¹. These are normally pronounced on the state occasions such as receptions at the royal court, national festivals, the installation or death of a chief with the aim of supporting claims to political, social or economic rights. Lists of place names usually give the names of places passed through during a period of migration. The main aim of testimonies of this kind is usually to maintain and defend rights to land. They are the main sources for the study of migrations and for information about demographic structure of the past¹². For oral societies such as those of pre-literate Africa, king lists and genealogies of chiefs are very important. Their function is to prove the continuity of the chieftainship and to justify the occupation of an office by a leader¹³. The historian can obtain from them information about the political and social developments of a chieftaincy or kingdom. He can also use the king lists and genealogies for establishing chronology by providing units of duration used to evaluate how far in the past something happened¹⁴.

Historical tales or narratives according to Finnegan usually give an account of events such as wars, migrations, and establishment of ruling dynasties and deeds of heroes. Their function is to record history as well as provide justification for the continued position and power of the ruling houses and are recited at ceremonial occasions¹⁵. Hence they are useful as sources of information about military, political and institutional history. Tales on tribal history allude to developments such as creation of the state, leading offices in the state and changes in territorial organisation. They also refer to raids, war and territorial conquests¹⁶.

Narratives on a family, clan or village do not usually go very far back into the past, because there are no specific custodians assigned to memorise them. Nevertheless the traditions can contribute in the reconstruction of the history of migrations as well as demographic trends. They can also reflect the economic development of the clans as some relate to trade, trade routes, markets and currency¹⁷. For example the Kuba village of Ibaanc (in DRC) has a praise name, which extols its former market. Other traditions on Kuba clans reveal that techniques of making embroidered cloth came to them from the Pende in the south west from whom the Kuba also obtained new crops in the 17th century¹⁸. Tales on families and clans are also useful as checks on official sources such as general traditions.

Myths are tales, which concern events thought and believed to have happened in the remote past, when the earth was sacred and different from what it is today. They attempt to explain a society and culture in terms of religious causes and their main characters are gods, animals or heroes¹⁹. Their function is to educate people or to warn them not to break the norms of the society. So to the historian myths are valuable sources for the history of religion and beliefs²⁰

Titles of rulers slogans, proverbs and riddles are another type of oral traditions, which to some extent allude to the history of the society concerned. Titles of rulers or chiefs in many pre-literate African societies were handed down to successive rulers and signified the chief's important status. The historian can use titles as auxiliary sources as the events they refer to require more information to be understood. For example, among the Rozvi people of Zimbabwe,

the title 'Changamire' resulted from a fusion of the name 'Changa' with the title 'Amir' given Changa by local Arab traders who were keen to extend their trade under a friendly patron²¹.

In the case of slogans, their value for the historian depends on the extent to which the original wording has been preserved. Often they can be understood in the light of explanatory commentaries. Proverbs and riddles sometimes contain some historical information, which has to be supplemented by commentaries as most proverbs and riddles are restricted to dealing with the moral norms of a society, the historian can discover what these norms were²².

Commentaries are another type of oral traditions, which are presented in the form of brief pieces of information, which are closely connected with a particular situation and are only transmitted in the context of that situation. They are recited at the same time as the traditions they are attached to. They are designed to explain those parts of a tradition, which a listener may fail to understand. According to Vansina, commentaries are good sources of information about the diffusion of cultural traits and ideas²³.

Overcoming limitations and weaknesses of oral traditions

The validity of oral tradition as sources of history has been questioned due to a number of weaknesses inherent in them. Nevertheless, Africanist historians have pointed out that the limitations can be overcome. The most obvious limitation of oral traditions, pointed out by T. Spear is that they don't extend more than four or five hundred years into the past²⁴. To counteract that limitation, the historian can supplement the historical information supplied by oral traditions with information from auxiliary disciplines. For example, historical linguistics is a good source of information concerning the history of migrations. As the basic vocabulary of a language changes only gradually, comparison of the vocabularies of the different languages can indicate when the differences between them arose²⁵. For example, the languages of Bantu people now found in Central Africa are so closely related that it has been possible to determine when the people split into various groups each speaking a variant of the original Bantu language as they migrated to settle in different regions.²⁶ For instance, the stem -ntu is common in their languages in the word meaning a person; for example muntu (Bemba), munhu (Shona) and muntu (Ndebele).

Functionalists have viewed oral traditions as historical charters which served to validate current political, economic and social institutions. So Spear has observed that oral traditions can be manipulated and twisted to reflect changing circumstances and support current political interests²⁷. Hence their value as historical sources becomes very questionable. To deal with that problem, oral traditions relating to small groups such as families, clans or followers of a cult can be used to cross check the reliability of official traditions²⁸. (It should be noted that official traditions include king lists, accounts of origin of dynasties, land right charters, privileges of chiefdoms and legal customs concerning water, animals and trees). Also connections between figures of one dynasty and the figures of another can be established through wars, marriages or meetings. Thus different traditions can be used to check one another.

Recourse to outside sources is another way of checking the authenticity of oral traditions. If an oral tradition makes reference to a natural phenomenon such as drought, an eclipse or earthquake, a follow up can be made. For example, in 1904 a Belgian historian, Emil Torday listened to the elders of Bushongo people of Congo reciting the past chiefs of their tribe. They referred to a day in the reign of the 98th chief when at noon the sun went out and there was total darkness for some time ²⁹. By studying astronomical records, Torday verified that there was a total eclipse of the sun, which affected that part of the Congo in 1680³⁰. This was not only proof of reliability of oral tradition but also a way of dating them. In other words, if a tradition mentions that an eclipse occurred during the reign of a particular chief and if a number of generations since his reign is known, then the eclipse can be dated accurately.

Other critics have questioned the validity of oral traditions as a source of history on the basis of its lack of chronology. Chronology is essential to history as it makes it possible to distinguish what proceeds from what follows. Emphasising the importance of chronology, Lord Raglan (quoted by Henige) declared, “without precise chronology there can be no history.”³¹ However, Africanist historians such as Jan Vansina and Joseph C. Miller who analysed oral traditions of pre-literate African societies have found various ways of establishing chronology of events from oral traditions.

Genealogies can be used to infer dates for individuals named in them. The dynastic genealogy is particularly useful as the rulers are arranged in sequence from the past to the present. Particular events may be identified with the eras of particular rulers, making it possible to construct a basic historical sequence of events ³². So the history of pre-literate societies can be made from genealogies.

Age-grades are another instrument for determining chronology from oral traditions. As age-grades are usually given names, which are remembered, in their correct sequence, they can be translated into a chronology once a date of initiation is known from writing.³³ It becomes possible to construct a reliable chronology as the grades are fairly fixed in length in each society where initiations take place regularly.

Historians have collected a number of traditions which refer to natural phenomena such as earthquake, a drought, an epidemic and an eclipse. Henige asserts that historians can use these extraordinary events because they can be dated, no matter how long ago they took place.³⁴ Examples are Halley’s comet which appeared in 1835 and an eclipse of the sun in 1680, which are both remembered in Kuba traditions³⁵.

Archaeology can be used in conjunction with oral tradition for corroboration purposes. When there is a link between a site and an asserted event in oral tradition dating can be obtained. For example, a local oral tradition in northern Rwanda concerning the Ndurwa kingdom claimed that two different kings occupied a particular site though only one occupation was visible. Excavation confirmed that there were two occupations one superimposed on the other and dated the occupations in the 18th century, which agreed with genealogical calculation³⁶.

According to Henige, another source for dating oral traditions is the written record of literate societies, which came into contact with traditional societies and recorded information about them³⁷. For instance, Miller who studied oral traditions of the Imbangala of Kasanje (in Angola) found that the Kasanje kings' contacts with the Portuguese active on the coast near Luanda enabled written documents that date their reigns with certainty to be left behind³⁸. From the aforesaid, it is clear that oral traditions have a part to play in the construction of the history of pre-literate African societies. What one reconstructs from oral sources may be of a lower order of reliability but this is no reason to denigrate oral traditions. The researchers may need more interdisciplinary collaboration, but in the end reliability of a higher order can be achieved.

Interpretation of oral traditions

In order to interpret oral traditions properly, the historian who collects oral traditions must be acquainted with the culture in which they flourish. Since particular oral traditions often have specific political or social functions, their transmission can be influenced by their functional importance³⁹. Spear has observed that sometimes traditions frequently personalise whole clans or lineages and cultural statements have a reality equal to that of historical events⁴⁰. So correct interpretation of oral traditions requires extensive knowledge of the culture in which they flourish. The historian has to note who is giving him the oral tradition, his age and position. For example, an aged court official who has served most of his life in the councils of a ruler is likely to present an oral tradition in a different way from that of a young school master. One has to remember that people retell stories they have heard from their elders interpreting them in such a way that they may fit more convincingly with the ideas and conditions of the present⁴¹.

In addition to proper interpretation of an oral tradition, the historian should subject it to external criticism. This involves finding out how the oral tradition has been transmitted, if others have corroborated it and if its content conforms to the possibilities of the state and period⁴². V Such analysis establishes the authenticity of the evidence. Internal criticism focuses on the content of the oral tradition. One has to examine the meaning of the evidence and whether it has changed in its function and to what extent⁴³. So once an oral tradition has been correctly interpreted and its authenticity and reliability established the historian should be able to reconstruct the history of the society concerned.

Conclusion

In short oral traditions are valuable sources of pre-literate African societies' history. Since historical poems and songs reflect important events, the historian can learn from such oral traditions, the societies political and social developments. The population migrations and demography of pre-colonial African societies, which are reflected by some of the oral traditions, help us grasp how colonial boundaries disrupted the traditional boundaries of African polities, thus sowing seeds for the ethnic conflicts that have troubled Africa during the post-colonial era.

From chiefs' genealogies and historical tales on tribes, the scholar of pre-colonial African societies gets to know the lineages, which were the legitimate ruling dynasties of their societies.

One also establishes the community who are the oldest inhabitants of certain territories and also some of the socio-economic strides they made during the pre-colonial era. Oral traditions relating to religion of oral societies contributed towards a sense of national identity. That national identity had a part to play in the development of African nationalism during the colonial period.

Endnotes

- ¹ Trevor-Roper in D. Henige, *Oral Hystography*, Longman, London, 1982, p21
- ² T. Spear, *Kenya 's Past*, Longman, 1981, pxix
- ³ J. Vanisna, *Oral Tradition as History*, Heinemann, Kenya, 1985, p27
- ⁴ J C Miller(ed), *The African Past Speaks*, Dawson, Kent, 1980, p2.
- ⁵ D. Laya, *The Oral Tradition: Problematic and Methodology of Sources of the African History*, UNESCO, Paris, 1972 p100.
- ⁶ J. Ki-Zerbo (ed) "Methodology and African Prehistory", in *General History of Africa vol 1*, UNESCO, 1989, p56.
- ⁷ R.Finnegan. *Oral Literature in Africa*, Oxford University Press, Nairobi, 1976, p 83-4
- ⁸ Ibid, p 208
- ⁹ J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology*, Penguin. 1965, p149
- ¹⁰ R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa*, p168
- ¹¹ J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology*, Penguin, p151
- ¹² Ibid, p 152
- ¹³ Ibid, p 154
- ¹⁴ J. Vanisna, *Oral Tradition as History*, p 24
- ¹⁵ R.Finnegan. *Oral Literature in Africa*, p 168
- ¹⁶ J. Vanisna, "The Use of Oral Tradition in African Culture History", in C. Gabel and N.R Bennett (ed), *Reconstructing African Culture History*, Boston University Press, Boston, 1967, p 68.

- ¹⁷ Ibid, p 67
- ¹⁸ Ibid, p 67
- ¹⁹ J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology*, p 157
- ²⁰ Ibid, p 157
- ²¹ D.P. Abraham, "Ethno-history of the Empire of Mutapa. Problems and Methods" in R. Mauny et al (ed), *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p 108
- ²² J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology*, p 14 Ibid, p 164
- ²³ Ibid, p 164
- ²⁴ T. Spear, *Kenya's Past*, Longman, Harlow, 1981, p xix
- ²⁵ J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition, A Study in Historical Methodology*, p 180.
- ²⁶ G.Mokhtar(ed),*General History of Africa volii*,UNESCO,1990,p298.
- ²⁷ T. Spear, *Kenya's Past*, p 47
- ²⁸ Ki-Zerbo (ed) "*Methodology and African Prehistory*" p 56
- ²⁹ J. Addison, *Ancient Africa*, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1970, p13
- ³⁰ Ibid, p 14
- ³¹ Lord Raglan in D. Henige, *Oral Historiography*, p 20.
- ³² D. W Cohen, "A study of the Interlacustrine Chronology", in *Journal of African History*, xi, 2, 1970, p177
- ³³ J. Vanisna, *Oral Tradition as History*, p 179
- ³⁴ D. Henige, *Oral Historiography*, p 102
- ³⁵ J. Vanisna, *Oral Tradition as History*, p 189.

- ³⁶ J. Vanisna, "The Use of Oral Tradition in African Culture History", in C. Gabel and N.R Bennett (ed), *Reconstructing African Culture History*, Boston University Press, Boston, 1967, p 72.
- ³⁷ D. Henige, "Oral Tradition and Chronology" in *Journal of African History*, xii,3, 1971, p387
- ³⁸ J.C. Miller, "Kings Lists and History in Kasanje", in *History in Africa*, 6, 1979, p51
- ³⁹ J. Vanisna, "The Use of Oral Tradition in African Culture History", in C. Gabel and N.R Bennett (ed), *Reconstructing African Culture History*, Boston University Press, Boston, 1967, p 58.
- ⁴⁰ T. Spear, *Kenya's Past*, p 48
- ⁴¹ A. Ryder, "Traditions and History" in J. D Fage (ed), *Africa Discovers Her Past*, Oxford University Press, London, 1970
- ⁴² J. Vansina, "Applying Rules of Historical Method to Oral Traditions," in R. Mauny et al (ed), *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, Oxford University Press, London, 1964, p 60
- ⁴³ Ibid, p60

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