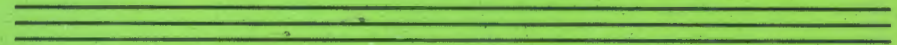


ISSN 1595 0298

**SOUTH SOUTH JOURNAL
OF CULTURE
AND DEVELOPMENT**

First Published June 1999 in the Kingdom of Lesotho

VOLUME 14 NO. 1 APRIL, 2012



**AN INTERNATIONAL MULTI-DISCIPLINARY
JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT**

SOUTH SOUTH JOURNAL OF CULTURE AND DEVELOPMENT

Publisher:

CULTURAL RESEARCH PUBLISHERS
(A division of Cultural research consults)
P. O. Box 157 Issele-uku, Delta State, Nigeria
And P. O. Box 2302 Uyo, Akwa Ibom State
Nigeria

Frequency:

Bi-Annually (June and December)

Citation:

SJC D

Subscription:

Includes postage by surface mail
Cheques are payable to Area Editors by name
Or directly to Prof. I. V. O. Modo
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Uyo. Uyo
Akwa Ihorn State
Nigeria

Annual:

US\$30 Southern Africa
US\$24 West and Central Africa
US\$28 East Africa
US\$40 Elsewhere

Copy right

© 2012 the Editor-in-Chief

THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF ORAL DOCUMENTATION IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN CULTURES

BY

ANTHONY C. ONWUMAH

*Director, Research and Publications,
and Head, Ibadan Outreach Office,
Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization
e-mail: tonyonwumah@yahoo.com*

SUMMARY

There is a growing debate on the usefulness or otherwise of oral documentation in the study of African cultures. This debate is borne out of the fact that, methods and media of information gathering, storage, and documentation have grown in sophistication and complexity. This has made it possible for an incredibly large volume of data to be stored in simple devices with an equally incredible amount of efficiency. The urge therefore is to discourage oral documentation in the light of the many draw backs associated with it. For instance, there is a limit to which large volume of data could be stored in the human memory and transmitted to future generations over a long period of time. Other

associated problems include: issue of bias and deliberate manipulation, establishing a reliable chronological and dating framework, quantification and language shift. These notwithstanding, the usefulness of oral documentation in the contemporary study of African cultures cannot be glossed over. It helps Africans to tell their own story by themselves, it has been found useful in refuting some euro centric views about African history and culture. In addition to assisting in finding solutions to political problems such as chieftaincy disputes and land matters it has equally been found useful by the present generation of African's political leaders as veritable instruments of teaching the youths about their past. The paper ends on a note of caution. Those who are interested in oral documentation must do so with caution, if the data obtained will be reliable.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists and historians such as Malinowski (1944), Pritchard (1982), Henige (1982), and Vansina (1965) have recognized the growing relevance of oral documentation as veritable sources of historical and ethnographical data. This view gains importance in the light of the fact that oral documentation was man's earliest medium of data collection and storage. In Africa, with a recent history of writing, oral documentation is not only important but indeed indispensable Adefuye (1987).

For instance, in Africa, the traditions of origin of societies and the totality of their cultures are transmitted orally. This therefore lends credence to the saying by Mandikas that "any old man who dies in Africa is like a whole library set ablaze".

This chapter interrogates the totality of oral documentation pointing out its strength and weaknesses. It concludes on the note that, the advancement in writing and other storage media notwithstanding, much of African history and culture is still expressed and transmitted orally.

The growth in knowledge and increasing sophistication in information storage and retrieval, an important issue which agitates the mind is, the continued necessity for the use of oral documentation to study African cultures. In an age when there are media and devices which can store, process and retrieve data in hundreds of millions, is it still desirable to document information and data orally? Since there are modern devices which are mostly based on computer technology, the urge to do away with oral documentation is high. Yet, oral documentation still has its place in African societies. Scholars have come to recognize that there are two sides to oral documentation. Thus, the ethnographer who is engaged in oral documentation must first and foremost decide if his project is on oral traditions or on oral history or a combination of both Albert

(1999). Though the two are closely related, they are not exactly the same. Albert (1999) while quoting Henige (1982:2) defines oral traditions as "those recollections of the past that are commonly or universally known in a given culture". Oral traditions are events or social experiences of the past which have been passed down from generation to generation. It includes myths, legends, proverbs, songs, chants and didactic tales. On the other hand, "oral history is the study of the recent past by means of life histories and personal recollections, where informants speak about their experiences." Therefore, the informant in an oral history project could have either experienced the event that he is narrating or he may have been told by someone who experienced it. Another distinguishing factor between oral traditions and oral history is the type of informants needed for the two. For an oral traditions project, the informant must be a special category of people: the very old, religious and political leaders and those who could be regarded as the custodians of the customs and traditions of the people. On the contrary, anybody could be an informant in an oral history project, so long as he or she has an idea or experience of the event that is being documented.

Generally, the collection of oral data has its advantages and disadvantages. Essentially, the advantages of oral documentation, especially in

Africa is that it enables them to tell their own stories by themselves. Hitherto, the history and culture of Africa was documented by western historians and anthropologists, (Adefuye: 1987). Expectedly, such documentations by foreigners were highly ethnocentric because African cultures and world views were evaluated from the lenses of Eurocentric scholarship. It was therefore highly judgmental, and with a lot of racist and imperialistic undertones. Oral traditions engender an almost value free documentation of African cultures.

Uses

Closely related to the above is that oral traditions have helped to repulse the attack on the African past and in so doing, it has redefined African historiography as a valid and respectable area of ethnographical and historical scholarship. With this, scholars and academics now study African populations firsthand unlike before when the whole idea of African history was seen as the history of European activities in Africa. Oral tradition is therefore being used by African leaders to teach and promote understanding of the past to the present generation. Adefuye (1987), states that this has become necessary because of the changing challenges facing African leaders. These include the challenges of nation building, integration and awareness of the past. Another importance of oral traditions is that it has been used by the leadership

encounter with the king of a town in the south western part of Nigeria about a crisis in the king's domain in the 1930s. The king pretended not to know of this crisis but subsequent interviews with other informants revealed the real story and showed why the king concealed such vital event in the history of his kingdom. The simple reason was because it was not in his best of interest to do so. A corollary to this point is that of intentional manipulation to score cheap political points. In the literature review for this study, I came across articles on the origins of the Benin monarchy and the arguments and counter arguments engendered by it. For the purposes of this paper, the contending arguments are divided into two: the new and the received traditions. According to the received traditions, Egharevba (1960), Bradbury (1973), the monarchy in Benin has its roots at Ile-Ife through Oranmiyan the son of Oduduwa. The full story goes thus; at a point in the history of Benin and for some reasons, the state degenerated into anarchy because there was no king. To restore normalcy, the elders of the state at that point in time sent emissaries to Ile-Ife requesting the king at Ile-Ife to send a ruler to Benin. In response, Oranmiyan one of the princes of Ife was sent to Benin as king. However, after a short while, he found the people very difficult to govern and described them as Ile-Ibinu or the land of vexation. He thus had to return to Ile-Ife but left behind his son from a Benin mother who eventually assumed the mantle of leadership in Benin as Oba Eweka the 1st.

On this, Bradbury (1973) states that, "the monarchy in Benin is alien but it grew and was nurtured under Benin influence". Egharevba (1960) in his account, *A Short History of Benin*, attested to the Ife origin of the monarchy in Benin. However, subsequent accounts mainly by writers of Benin origin such as Edebiri, Air Iyare and very recently, by the Benin monarch, Omo N'oba N'Edo Uku Akpolokpolo Oba Erediauwa claims that the monarchy in Benin is indigenous. To some extent and by implication the argument is that the monarchy in Yorubaland as exemplified by the king at Ife could have been derived from Benin. According to this account, at a point in the history of Benin, the last Ogiso, Owodo by name had only one son. His desire for more children was frustrated as all his wives could not bear children. An inquiry through divination purportedly revealed that his only son was responsible for the barrenness of his wives. To change the situation, the diviners instructed that the only son should be killed. The story continued that as fate would have it, the executioners spared the life of Ekalerderan (the name of the king's only son) who was left to wander in the forest. He eventually made his way to Ile-Ife where because of his bravery and perhaps organizational ability he was made a king. He was eventually discovered by the Benis and requested to return to Benin as king but he refused. Rather, he opted to send his son Oranmiyan to Benin as king. With this, Oranmiyan

was of Benin and not Yoruba origin as widely believed.

However, the above claims have been subjected to serious scrutiny and its gaps and weaknesses made bare. For example, Akinola (1973) collected oral traditions in Benin on the origin of the Eweka dynasty. He found among other things that the new traditions of the Eweka dynasty were not current at the time of Egharevba's documentation of the history of Benin. He also personally interviewed Oba Akenzua II and recorded the surprise on his face when the issue of Ekalerderan was mentioned to him. After examining all the issues, arguments and counter arguments he concluded that the new traditions should be treated as new till when more data are produced to substantiate them. Akinola is not alone in his views. Professor Ade Ajayi has similarly described the new traditions and particularly the views of the Oba as an attempt to play politics with history. The new traditions have also been criticized for its silence on the etymology of Oranmiyan. It will also be important to explain why Yoruba monarchs share the same title Oba as the monarch in Benin. If Ekalerderan was the fugitive from Benin who became a king at Ile-Ife, why does the king at Ife not go by the title Ogiso?

The above detailed account of the controversy surrounding the origin of the Benin monarchy has been delved into to show how oral traditions could be

abused and manipulated to suit selfish purposes. The ethnographer in such a situation faces the challenges of sifting the chaff from the wheat.

Another challenge which an ethnographer that is involved in the collection of oral traditions could face is that of quantification. For example, how can a researcher determine the population of the ancient empire of Ghana or the size of its army? In the same way, to what extent is it possible to ascertain the volume of trade which took place in the past if all the efforts at obtaining such data are based on oral documentation. Yet quantification is important because it enhances the quality of research. On this issue Mugaju (1987) has this to say "Quantification has helped to verify, qualify and even demolish long standing assumptions, generalizations and interpretations." The problem of quantification in oral tradition is one of the factors which make some scholars to view it as a poor source of data, be it historical or ethnographical (Mugaju:1987).

Be all these as they may, by far the most severe drawback of oral tradition is the problems associated with dating and its very weak chronological base. Henige (1987) defines chronology as "the placing of historical events in time with regard (relative chronology), to one another and with regard wherever possible to a fixed calendar."

On the importance of chronology, Henige also states

"It is sure - - - that anyone but historians are much interested in knowing such things as exactly how long ago a war, earthquake or other events occurred and how long they lasted; how much time intervened between two particular events; which of the two or more events preceded the other(s) or how old somebody was when he did something" (Henige 1982:96) .

Because of the problems associated with chronology and dating it has again been argued in some quarters (Murdock 1959:43) that oral traditions is not a good source of ethnographical or historical data. But Henige as quoted by Barkindo (1987) argues that such assumption amounts to throwing away the baby with the bath water. He (Henige) then opined that the task before the researcher is to work and rework the available data till that which is nearest to the truth is arrived at. One of such efforts is the use of relative chronology by relating one event to the others. This should however be done with utmost caution bearing in mind the limitations of oral traditions. One of such limitations is that a particular oral tradition may not be the total history of a particular society. Therefore, another task before the researcher is to collect as many versions of the oral traditions and then by a rigorous and painstaking effort establish a correlation between the different versions. The researcher, particularly the ethnographer can equally improve the quality of his

work by obtaining and crosschecking data from other areas such as linguistics and archaeology. He, the ethnographer can also address the issue of chronology by the use of king list. The problems of chronology and dating are not the only challenges that could face the ethnographer. He, (the ethnographer) may have to contend with the issue of language if he or she is working in an area that is outside his or her language group. To fully understand the culture of a people, the ethnographer requires more than just a working knowledge of the language. He requires a deep understanding of the nuances and knitty gritty of the language to effectively study its culture. This problem is usually resolved by the use of informants and interpreters. Yet, this also has its limitations because data obtained directly, are never the same as those from interpretation. Sometimes, the sentiments and biases of the informant cum interpreter may adversely affect the whole exercise.

This naturally leads to yet another challenge of oral documentation and that is the problem of language shift. According to Orugbani (1987), a language could be said to have shifted "where a community no longer speaks its ethnic language". That is, it has adopted the language of another group in place of its own. In such a situation, the original language will no longer be transmitted to the oncoming generation. He, Orugbani also observed that when a community adopts the language of another community it also

adopts its culture. The problem is, how does the ethnographer crosscheck with linguistic data the oral traditions of a community which language has shifted? He cited the Obonoma as a good example of a community which language shifted. Although the community speaks Kalabari and references are made to their linkages with Kalabari, the oral traditions of the Obonoma indicate differences in the traditions of origin of the Obonoma and the Kalabari. Orugbani therefore opines that the choice left to either the historian or ethnographer in such a situation is to crosscheck with data from religious and other related sources.

This study also brought to the fore some other weaknesses of oral traditions. These weaknesses were identified from a study of three towns in Delta State. These towns are: Issele-Uku; Onicha-Ugbo; and Obior. In these three towns, oral tradition was collected. The discoveries at these places present a curious finding of the weaknesses and abuse of oral traditions which the ethnographer must be conscious of before embarking on field work. One is that some people do not want to accept that their ancestor was a woman. For instance, among the Umuezechima, Onicha-Ugbo, Obior and Issele-Uku are contending for seniority and by implication headship of the clan. Based on oral traditions it is unanimously agreed that Obior was the eldest child of Ezechima. All the other towns among the Umuezechima agree that the founder of Obior was a woman and cannot be the

head in a patrilineal society. Obior contests this claim vehemently insisting that its founder was a man called Ukpali. But the vexatious point is the unanimity of views by the other eight towns which make up the clan that Obior was a woman. Can Obior standing alone be acceptable and more reliable than that of the other towns put together? The point to note here is, people are reluctant to accept that the founder of their town was a woman. This is a pointer to the fact that the Umuezechima is a male dominated society. A similar scenario was also observed in Ubulu clan. Aniobodo, the founder of Ubulu-Uno is the acknowledged senior of all the towns in the clan. However, Ubulu-Uku contests Ubulu-Uno's headship of the clan because Aniobodo was a woman. On the other hand, Ubulu-Uno maintains that its progenitor Aniobodo was a man and not a woman. The above claims and counter claims poses a challenge to the ethnographer on how oral traditions could be abused and manipulated to serve political purposes.

The manipulation of oral traditions also surfaced in the relationship between Benin and Agbor. Egharevba (1960) in his account in *A Short History of Benin* had claimed that Benin defeated Agbor severally during the pre-colonial times. He in fact stated that Benin was planning another military expedition against Agbor in 1897 when the plan was disrupted as a result of the British invasion of Benin in that year. But the Agbor Patriotic Union refutes

the claim insisting that it was Agbor that defeated Benin in several battles. The Union further went on to state that it was the defeat inflicted on Benin by Agbor that made it to dig moats round its city. The issue is that people do not want to admit that their ancestors were defeated in war. Therefore, it is up to the researcher to deploy his or her ingenuity and seek other sources to validate or refute data from oral traditions.

It is however misleading to believe that the above are the only challenges facing the ethnographer who wants to embark on oral documentation. The truth is that the challenges commence before the fieldwork. For effective oral documentation to be achieved, rigorous planning and adequate preparations are absolutely imperative. The ethnographer in such a situation must first and foremost acquaint himself with all relevant and available literature on his area of study. With this, he is equipped with what has already been known about the area and the gaps in them. This will enable him to phrase his questions appropriately. More importantly, he will go prepared and not with an "empty" mind. The review of the literature could be very problematic and two scenarios could emerge. The first is the situation where the researcher is faced with too many materials and may find it too difficult to go through all of them. This situation calls for painstaking determination because the reward at the end of the day in terms of preliminary data may not be easily

quantifiable. The other and by far more problematic scenario is the situation where there is a dearth of materials on a given area. In such circumstance, the researcher could explore internet resources or simply accept his fate as one doing a pioneering work.

Note of Caution

For rigor and accuracy to be attained, it is important for the researcher to embark on a preliminary field trip (Albert; 1999). The benefits of this cannot be over emphasized. It could help him to draw up his budget for the fieldwork proper. It could also help to arrange for such things as accommodation, identify informants and establish rapport with the local people especially the would-be respondents. Albert described it as a time to test the water before jumping into it.

The next problem is, how does the researcher ascertain how long he has to stay in the field before writing. Put differently, is there any length of time that is generally held as sacrosanct that a researcher must stay in the field before he could be deemed to have a good grasp of a people and on the basis of which he could write authoritatively? Before, there was an insistence on a minimum of one year. This is to enable the researcher understand the language and culture of the people he is studying. Contemporarily, things have changed. There is no

insistence on any length of time, but researchers are encouraged not to publish about a people till he could do so authoritatively. For this reason, participant observation is encouraged. How he participates and observes also depends on his ingenuity and speed with which he learns all that is needed to be learnt about people.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion which could be drawn is, oral documentation, as simple as it may appear on the surface is a highly technical and specialized area of intellectual endeavour. It is therefore not an all comers affair. Though it has some weaknesses, it has so many advantages. To enhance its value, rigorous training to inculcate the requisite attributes such as patience, ability to work long hours is necessary. Its beauty and validity become enhanced if data from it are crosschecked and validated with data from other sources. It is obvious from this study that, in Africa, oral traditions will continue to be relevant to researchers particularly in the humanities, to politicians, policy formulators and administrators.

REFERENCES

Afigbo, A. E. 1981

"The Benin Mirage in The History of South Central Nigeria in *Nigeria Magazine* Vol 139 pp 17-25

Agbaje-Williams, B. 1987

"Ife, Old Oyo and Benin: A Chronological Consideration in the Light of Recent Archaeological Work at Old Oyo in *Nigeria Magazine* Vol. 55 no 5 p 23-32

Agiri, Babatunde 1975

"Yoruba Oral Tradition with Special Reference to the Early History of Oyo Kingdom in Wande Abimbola (eds) *Yoruba Oral Tradition* pp 157-197

Adefuye, Ade 1987

"The Use and abuse of Oral Traditions in *Tarikh* vol. 4 E. J. Alagoa (eds).

Akeh-Osu, Chris A 1992

"The History of The Great Isi-Ile-Uku (Issele-Uku) Kingdom: The Emergence of The Mighty Umuezechima: Onitsha, Etuokwu Publishers

Akinola G. A. 1973

"The Origin of the Eweka Dynasty of Benin; A Study in the Use and Abuse of Oral Tradition; Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria Vol. No. 48.

- Andah, B 1987
"The Nature of African Oral tradition. Tarikh (vol 87) for
The Historical Society of Nigeria"
- Albert, O. I, 1999
"Techniques for collecting Oral Data in African Culture,
History" in *Handbook of Methodology in African
Studies* Dele Olayiwola (eds) Ibadan, John
Archers Publishers Limited.
- Alagoa, E. J. 1978
"Oral Traditions and History in Africa" *Kiabara* Vol 1 No
1 pp 8-25
- Alagoa, E. J. (eds)
1981 *Forms on History*, *Kiabara* Vol 4, No 2
1968 "The use of Oral Literary data for
History: Examples from the Niger Delta" *Journal
of American Folklore* 8 (321) pp 235-242
1972 "A History of The Niger Delta"
Ibadan University Press
1981 "The Python's Eye: Inaugural
Lecture, University of Port Harcourt
1981 "Oral Traditions: A Study in
Historical Methodology", London Routledge and
Kegan Paul
- Awe, Bolanle 1974
Praise Poems As Historical Data: The Example of
"Yoruba Oriki" *Africa* XLIV (4) pp 331-349

Barkindo, B 1990

"Oral Traditions and Chronology: The Problems of Dating the History of Mandara Sultanate" *Oral Tradition and Oral History in Africa and The Diaspora: Theory and Practice* E. J. Alogoa (eds) CBAAC, Lagos.

Beals, Ralph and Harry Haijer 1965

An Introduction to Anthropology, New York Macmillan Press Limited.

Biobaku, S. O. 1976

Introduction To The Living Culture of Nigeria Lagos. Thomas Nelson (Nigeria) Limited.

Dortmont, M. R. and Toyin Falola 1990

"Interpreting Oral Traditions as an Historical Source and The Use of Models: An Assessment of Vansina". *Oral Tradition and Oral History in Africa and The Diaspora: Theory and Practice* E. J. Alogoa (eds) CBAAC, Lagos

Babayemi, S. O. 1990

"Oriki Orile As sources of Historical Data". *Oral tradition and Oral History in African and The Diaspora: Theory and Practice* E. J. Alogoa (eds) CBAAC, Lagos

Bradbury, R. E.

1973 *Benin studies*, London: Oxford University Press.

1959 "Chronological Problems in the
Study of Benin History" journal of The Historical
Society of Nigeria Vol. 1 No 4 pp 263-287

1969 The Benin Kingdom and The Edo
Speaking Peoples of Southern Nigeria, London.

Egharevba 1960

A Short History of Benin Ibadan University
Press.

Henige, D. 1987

Dating the Past from Oral Tradition. *Tarikh* Vol .8 for
The Historical Society of Nigeria.

Onwujeogwu, M. A. 1987

The Dating of Oral Tradition. *Tarikh* Vol 8 for The
Historical Society of Nigeria

Orugbani A. 1987

1990 Language Shift and Oral Tradition: The Case of
Obonoma in the Kalabari Community, Oral
Tradition and Oral History in Africa and the
Diaspora: Theory and Practice E. J. Alagoa
(eds), CBAAC, Lagos.

Mugaju, J. B. 1990

"The Problems of Quantification in Oral Traditions".
*Oral Tradition and Oral History in Africa and The
Diaspora: Theory and Practice* E. J. Alagoa
(eds) CBAAC, Lagos

Murdock, J. 1954

Africa: Its people and Their Cultural History, New York.

Uzoigwe, G. N. 1990

"On Values and Oral Tradition: Towards A New Field of Historical Research. Oral tradition and Oral History in Africa and Diaspora: Theory and Practice.

Vansina, J. 1965

Oral Traditions, A Study in Historical methodology, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.