

## **-THE RELEVANCE OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN AFRICAN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examined the significance of archaeology - one of the sources of historical information - in the reconstruction of African history. It began by giving a general overview of the sources of history from the Afro-centric perspective, to debunk most of the Euro-centric misconceptions about African history. Being a qualitative-dominant research, data was culled mainly from secondary sources and the historical method of analysis was adopted. We argue that though the study and practice of African archaeology is still inundated with colonial theories and methods such that the results of investigations are not entirely African-oriented, African archaeologists should work toward evolving paradigms, theories and methods that are indigenous and congruent with the African milieu, de-linking the continent from every alien vestiges and, thus aid African historians in the production of authentic African history. Such measure will go a long way in the task of decolonising African history.*

**Keywords:** Archaeology, African historical reconstruction, paradigm shift.

### **Introduction**

It is incontrovertible that the discipline of archaeology is one of the sources used by historians in reconstructing the human past. The rationale for an adequate knowledge of past human activities cannot be over-emphasised. For one thing, the collective memory of a people's past should necessarily serve as a veritable instrument of nation building, especially in Africa where intrastate conflicts, manifesting in civil wars, genocide, militancy, religious fundamentalism, insurgency and separatist agitations mar the fortunes of national integration. Devoid of the knowledge of its history, a society is certainly condemned to collective amnesia. This then underscores the relevance of a sustained national official policy and its implementation regarding the teaching of history at all levels of educational institution in Africa.

This paper is divided into five sections. The first section introduces the subject-matter of the study. The second portion of the paper gives a general overview of the sources of history. The third part of the paper discusses how the discipline of archaeology is applied in the reconstruction of human past. The fourth section demonstrates instances of archaeological excavations in Nigeria, while the fifth and final section is the concluding part of the work.

### **An Overview of the Sources of History**

Given the overwhelming importance of historical knowledge to every society, it is pertinent to give a general overview of what constitutes the sources of history as a guide to budding historians, interested amateurs, dilettantes, professional historians and non-historians alike. Apart from archaeology, the other sources of history include oral evidence which consists of oral tradition and oral history; then there are written sources, linguistic sources and ethnographic data.

Jan Vansina, a celebrated author in oral historiography, has noted that oral tradition consists of "testimonies of the past, which are deliberately transmitted from mouth to mouth" (Vansina, 1960:46). According to him, "there must be transmission by word of mouth over at least a generation [and that] our definition is a working definition for the use of historians, sociologists, linguists or scholars of the verbal arts..." (Vansina, 1985:27-28). Although Vansina's paradigm may not be acceptable to every historian, his *magnum opus* provides a broad

methodological framework in using oral evidence to reconstruct African history (Vansina, 1965: ch.1). Oral tradition takes the form of poems, songs, proverbs and narratives about events, among others.

Generally, the basic feature of oral tradition is that the person reporting is not an eye witness to the event; and from the point of view of defect, there is the tendency of memory loss by the informant and that of distortion of facts arising from prejudice. But oral history consists of contemporaneous events reported by eye witnesses or participants to the events. Thus, the distinguishing features of oral history are that it consists of events of the recent past and that they are reported by eyewitnesses or participants to the events. The relevance of oral sources to the reconstruction of history cannot be over emphasised. Much of what we have today as African history has come through the instrumentality of oral tradition, to debunk the dubious claims of Western scholars such as A. P. Newton who opined that “history begins when men begin to write” (Amadi, 1999: 6).

Written sources of history would normally consist of documents such as diaries, memoirs, letters, reports of commissions of enquiry, memoranda, legal documents, industrial and commercial records, intelligence reports, books, journal articles, newspapers and magazines, among others. Three types of written sources have been identified in the Nigerian region. The first is the *nsibidi* script which developed among the Ekoi groups of the Cross River basin and percolated into Igboland up to the Bende area (Isichei, 1976:36-38). The second was the Arabic script which penetrated the Nigeria area with the introduction of Islam into Borno and Hausaland from about the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Third, from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century; the Roman script was introduced into the Nigerian region from the West African coast, by the European explorers. Roman script became more significant and widespread from the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the European travelers, traders and missionaries penetrated the interior, and wrote copiously about different aspects of pre-colonial Nigerian societies. It must be noted here that the advent of colonial rule in Nigeria gave impetus and predominance to the use of Roman script. This is because the records of British colonial administration were all preserved in Roman script (Falola *et al*, 1999: 4-5).

Ethnographic materials consist of a wide range of data deriving from the life, belief system, customs and various other practices held by a people to attest to a common past. They include all cultural, political and social institutions of the particular society and could take the form of religious rituals, system of oath-taking, drum beats, songs, proverbs, among others.

Then we come to historical linguistics as a veritable source of information for historical reconstruction. It could be defined as the study of languages in terms of their structure and how they are related to one another. By comparing a variety of languages, linguists are able to determine the percentage of relationship and therefore are able to conclude if the speakers of the languages were one people *ab initio*. Historical linguistics deal with such studies as genetic relationship of languages, dialectology, glottochronology and etymology. But these technical jargons should not detain us here as they do not necessarily constitute the main subject of our discourse. What is most important to note is that historical linguistics studies the changes in languages through time and space, so as to explain the various stages of evolution of a language, the differences and divergences (Falola, 3-22).

Based on history-oriented researches on their genetic relationship, African languages have been classified into different families. For instance, some languages in Southern Nigeria such as Igbo, Idoma, Edo, Efik, Ijo and Yoruba belong to the KWA sub-group of the Niger-Congo language

family. Some linguists are of the opinion that these Kwa languages must have evolved somewhere in the River Niger-Benue region. If we should accept this, it means that the epical speakers of these languages lived in this general area before fanning out into the various territories they now inhabit (Njoku, 1986:139-174). For instance, these groups have similar names and pronunciation for some plants (Kimbers, 2012: 140-147). With this general overview of the sources of history, we shall now concentrate on the subject of our study that is, the relevance of archaeology to historical reconstruction.

### **Reconstructing the past through archaeology**

It is now generally accepted that in every society, past human populations leave evidences of their life at the sites where they had lived. These evidences are relics of material culture created and/or used by man and they include artifacts of all sorts such as dwellings and evidence of industrial processes, rubbish heaps, fortifications (defence fences), weapons, tools, implements, objects of adornment (beads, bracelets), religious temples and domestic utensils. The material remains also include biological materials such as skeletal remains, fossils, desiccated vegetable remains, seeds of plants and bones of domesticated animals, among others. Deposits of pottery, grind-stones and human graves are also inclusive. Therefore, archaeology is a method of reconstructing human past through the use of relics of material culture. It is “the technique of reconstructing the history of an area using the physical and material remains of the past inhabitants of the area” (Anozie, 2002: 13-23).

In the use of these material remains to reconstruct history, it provides further information to supplement other sources of history. The study, analysis and interpretation of these remains can yield information about the past of any human settlements, domestication of plants and animals, the advent of agriculture, trading activities, social stratification in any given society, as well as relationships between different groups of people. Sites are usually excavated by trained archaeologists to uncover these artifacts which also help us to learn about the customs of the people that used the objects.

There are three major reasons that account for the survival of these objects for very many years without total destruction. First is the nature of the relic as some objects are known to last longer while others do not. A good example is stone which survive longer than wood. Bones also last longer than flesh. Second is that the chemical composition of the site where the object is excavated determines its preservation. This is because some objects can resist moisture while others cannot. Third is the habits, attitude and customs of the makers and /or users of the objects. If they have the habit of disposing of their wastes by burning, then the objects cannot survive. It is also impossible for the objects to survive if the people lived a nomadic life (Falola, 1986: 3-22). But objects of people who led a sedentary life are known to survive.

In making use of the objects to reconstruct history, a number of stages are involved. In the first place, the objects or artifacts are carefully excavated only by trained archaeologists. The archaeologist must employ the principle of stratigraphy that is, recording the order and relative positions of the objects, arranged in layers. Thus, the principle of stratification as used in geology is applied here that is, “that the deeper layers are older than the upper layers except in well-defined circumstances” (Shaw, 1965:23-38). The archaeologist then takes the objects to the laboratory for analysis and interpretation to determine aspects of the lives and history of those that made and/or used the said artifacts. Because archaeological evidences are indirect, archaeologists are bound to grapple with varying degrees of probability.

Dating the objects is also crucial in order to determine the chronology of the events in the order of their historical or scientific importance. There are two dating methods – the relative and the

absolute. Relative dating only indicate that one event took place before or after the other. It does not yield exact date or the number of years an event occurred. To obtain relative dates, three methods are used. Firstly, the archaeologist must ascertain the stratigraphic position of the objects being studied; objects located at the top are assumed to have been made at a later date than those below. Secondly, dateable foreign objects are used to assign dates to indigenous objects. This is called the cross culture method. Thirdly, palynology is used to reveal man's interaction with his environment over time. Palynology is referred to as the study of fossil pollen and, we know that pollens are resistant to decay.

Absolute dating also does not give exact historical dates but counts in years. Thus, an object could be assigned a certain stated period spanning years. Absolute dates come from counting tree rings (dendrochronology) and verves (the layers of clays) and mostly form radio-metric methods. The radio-metric methods include the potassium/argon method used in dating volcanic rocks; the thermoluminescence which dates ceramic and, the radio-carbon dating (R.C. 14) technique used for organic materials. It is important to note that the R.C. 14 technique is most widely used because of its reliability (Falola, 1986).

A crucial caveat to be borne in mind is that there is no certainty in the dates deriving from these various techniques as they should be seen as mere statistical probabilities. Given that they are prone to errors, there is the necessity to have several pairs of dates to reinforce each other before some level of authenticity can be placed on them.

### **Archaeological excavations in Nigeria**

Although the practice of archaeology was introduced into Nigeria by the European colonialists who had no interest in promoting the cultural heritage of the people (Eze-Uzoamaka, 2014:1-17), we now know from archaeology that human interaction with the environment, or better put, historical activities in what later became Nigeria, are of considerable antiquity. The earliest archaeological discoveries in Nigeria were made in 1910 when some European mining companies discovered many Acheulian tools in Nok and the Jos Plateau in the bid of exploiting tin and other minerals. This was followed by a German scholar, Leo Frobenius who Between 1910 and 1911, visited "the Old Yoruba Kingdom and collected both by purchase and unauthorized archaeological excavations many terracotta and a few bronze objects in some Yoruba archaeological sites" (Anozie, 2002).

Archaeological excavations carried out in Hausaland and Borno in northern Nigeria have confirmed human habitation in these areas as far back as 1000 B.C. Following the desiccation of the Sahara Desert *circa* 2500 B.C., human populations had been forced to move southwards into the northern fringes of present-day Nigeria. This has been demonstrated by evidence from the Nok culture complex of the Jos Plateau and the Lireu Hills (Uya, 1992:12-30) and which flourished between 500 B.C. and A.D. 200. Archaeological excavation carried out at Iwo Eleru in the South-west, yielded a human skull dated 9,000 B.C. In the east of the River Niger, archaeological research has also confirmed that human populations inhabited this area as early as 3,000 B.C.

In Igboland, archaeology was not known until 1939 when a retired coal miner was digging a pit in his compound in Igbo-Ukwu and came across hundreds of beads and some bronze objects, including some hemispherical bowls. On getting this report, the Assistant District Officer in Awka bought some of the objects but later donated them to the Department of Antiquities when it was established in the early 1950s. Then in December 1959, a Cambridge archaeologist, Prof.

Thurstan Shaw who had worked for many years in West and Southern Africa, was invited by the Department of Antiquities to study the archaeology of the area. And so between December 1959 and January 1960, he dug two sites in which he discovered several cultural materials. Shaw named the two sites Igbo-Isaiah and Igbo-Richard. In 1962, Prof. Shaw was appointed a Research Professor of Archaeology at the University of Ibadan, thus enabling him to continue his research in Igbo-Ukwu. In 1964, he went back to the town and excavated a third site and called it Igbo-Jonah. Shaw's archaeological excavations in Igbo-Ukwu have been published in two volumes (Shaw, 1970).

In 1963, Donald Dean Hartle was appointed an archaeologist in the Department of History of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Having surveyed most of the then Eastern Nigeria, he did excavate a few sites before the outbreak of the Nigerian civil war in 1967. V. E. Chikwendu, as part of the requirements for his doctorate degree, excavated the Ugwuagu Rockshelter in Ehugbo (Afikpo) in 1975. F. N. Anozie excavated an iron smelting site at Umundu in March, 1976, and the Umukete in Aguleri in May, 1976. Furthermore, artefacts of Late Stone Age recovered from Nsukka (Isi-Ugwu Obukpa Rockshelter and the University of Nigeria Agricultural Farm Site) have demonstrated the continuity of human occupation and the material culture of the people of that area of Nigeria (Anozie, 2002).

Through archaeology, it has been confirmed that the famous artistic works of Nigeria were not alien but indigenous. These include the various bronzes and terracotta heads found in Ile-Ife, Benin and Igbo-Ukwu, and deposited in our national museums across the country. They are indeed parts of Nigeria's indigenous civilisation. What is striking is that evidence from archaeological artefacts in our museums confirms tremendous affinities and cultural diffusion among the Nigerian ethnic groups. The chronological display of the Nok, Igbo-Ukwu, Ife, Benin and Owo bronzes in any museum confirm these affinities in style, techniques and meaning, thereby testifying to the bridging role of culture among the Nigerian groups. Similarities in our multi-ethnic nation are also shown in our sculptures, painting, textiles, ceramics and graphics (Imbuaet *al*, 2012:86). Indeed, these artefacts and artistic expressions are veritable instruments for inter and intra ethnic cohesion, nation building, national consciousness and national integration in Nigeria.

It is, therefore, lamentable that our museums are not patronized due to public ignorance of the place of museums in contemporary society. This is buttressed by the fact that Nigerian museums receive very few researchers and visitors. One of the reasons for this lack of interest is the fact that Nigerian museums, just like their counterparts in other parts of Africa, are yet to wholly assume the African character; and this is due to the colonial legacies inherited by the African museums (Okpoko, 2011:54).

### **Conclusion**

Archaeology constitutes one of the veritable sources of information in the reconstruction of history. Other sources discussed above, such as oral evidence, ethnography, linguistics and written documents, do complement it in this endeavour. All are, therefore, useful for research into the past of indigenous peoples. Ethnography is useful in collecting oral traditions. And given the limitations inherent in archaeological record such as vulnerability of material culture in the tropics, oral traditions are necessary in the interpretation of African past.

By and large, the study and practice of African archaeology are still inundated with colonial theories and methods such that the results of investigations are not entirely African-oriented. African archaeologists should, therefore, work toward evolving paradigms, theories and methods that are indigenous and congruent with the African milieu, de-linking the continent from every

alien vestiges and, thus aid African historians in the production of authentic African history. Such measures would contribute immensely in the onerous task of decolonising African history.

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