

COMMUNAL ORAL HISTORIANS AS RESERVOIRS AND CURATORS OF INDIGENOUS HISTORICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Chidi P. Anene (PhD)

Department of History and International Studies

Imo State University

P.M.B. 2000 Owerri, Nigeria.

E-mail: amakeme@yahoo.com; Phone no: +2348063414134

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Chinonyerem U. Njoku (PhD)

Department of History and International Studies

Imo State University

P.M.B. 2000 Owerri, Nigeria.

E-mail: chinonnjoku@gmail.com; Phone no: +2348035079809

Abstract

The traditional African mode of education is the oral tradition which involves collective testimonies and recollection of the past inherited from earlier generations. It is believed that that because most African societies have oral, non-literary traditions, they have been able to develop complex and striking webs of eyewitness account, folklore, stories, proverbs, idioms, legends and myths for all imaginable circumstances; African myths therefore form the ideals and beliefs of cultural practices. As important as this oral tradition is, it has continued to be a reservoir of inexhaustible wisdom where Africans learn about their origin, history, culture and religion; about meaning and reality of life; about morals, norms and survival techniques. Such is the beauty of oral tradition whose narrative the Igbo oral traditional historians are embedded as a link between the past and the present and future existence of the people as well as serving the purpose of the intellectual historians in the ivory tower. Indeed, the traditional Igbo oral historians mediates between town and gown for the survival of our cherished past. In the light of above, this discourse is examined under the following themes: the nature and mode of indigenous education; importance of oral history in the contemporary times, community oral historians as professional historians, and lastly, the role of community oral historians as reservoirs and curators of indigenous historical scholarship and concluding remarks.

Keywords: Communal, Oral, Historians, Traditional, Culture, Religion

Introduction

The role and importance of oral history in the reconstruction of African history and historical scholarship cannot be over emphasized. And there has been unconscious attempt to extol the educational exploits of the oral historians of formal education extraction while relegating those of indigenous informally educated historians who incidentally are the custodians and providers of oral history. These are skilled historians who not only husband indigenous history; they tell, provide, supply and transmit oral history to the formally educated historians for documentation. Without services of these indigenous informally educated oral historians, there would be no oral history as well as documented history for the reconstruction of our battered historical past by the Western scholars. The characteristics, goals, modes of transmission, teaching and learning strategies of indigenous African education, in which the pursuit of excellence and quality has always been an important aim produced classic professional of various strands, hence, cannot be said to uneducated people simply because they were not educated in the Western sense of reading and writing. Informal and vocational training constitute the core of indigenous education in Africa. Under this traditional system, each person in the community is practically trained and prepared for his/her role in society. It is a holistic system, in which storytelling, proverbs and myths also play an important role (Omolewa, 2007).

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In the light of above, this discourse is examined under the following themes: the nature and mode of indigenous education; importance of oral history in the contemporary times, community oral historians as professional historians, and lastly, the role of community oral historians as reservoirs and curators of indigenous historical scholarship and concluding remarks.

The Nature and Mode of Indigenous Education

Education has been a means of transmitting one's culture from one generation to another. It is the process of bringing about a relatively permanent change in human behaviour. As the oldest industry, it is the main instrument used by society to preserve, maintain and upgrade its social equilibrium. A society's future depends largely on the quality of its citizen's education. In all human societies, education is meant to pass on to the new generations the existing knowledge of their physical environment, to introduce individuals to the organization of society, give them skills for performing their daily jobs and enjoying their leisure, as well as inculcate sound morals in them for their own benefit and that of the society. In other words, education is a process by which the society assists the younger generation to understand the heritage of their past, participate productively in the society of the present as well as contribute to the future (Esu and Junaid, 2004). An education system may be either formal/western or informal/traditional/indigenous, but the bottom line is that it is a way of assisting the younger generations to understand the past as well as exposing them to the various values, ideals, and aspirations of the society. The pre-colonial Igbo people are not exception to the idea of continuing education of its citizenry, particularly the young adults.

Nature:

The traditional system of education which existed in the pre-colonial Nigeria societies in general, and Nigeria in particular was geared towards induction of members of the society into activities and mode of thought that were considered worthwhile, in relation to their rich cultural heritage which was preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. Even though there were in most cases no schools and professional teachers in the perspective of Western education, it lacked the modern classroom setting under the guidance of form teachers; characterized by absence of students/pupils with uniforms, regimentation and permanent teachers, yet there were certain centres for initiation and adult members of society served as teachers (Esu and Junaid, 2004)

It was essentially practical training designed to enable the individual to play a useful role in society. The philosophy of traditional education was very pragmatic and was designed to form a gate way to the life of the society. It was based on the philosophy of functionalism and productivity. Although there were few theoretical abstractions, the main objective was to inculcate a sense of social responsibility of the community to individuals to contribute meaningfully to the society. One of the main features of traditional African education was the apprenticeship mode of learning whereby people learned under masters. Therefore, traditional education, is primarily the process by which every society attempts to preserve and upgrade the accumulated knowledge, skills and attitudes in its cultural setting and heritage to foster continuously the well being of mankind. The content of the curriculum of traditional education was very comprehensive and based on the philosophy underlying the various job responsibilities in society (Mosweunyane, 2013; Esu and Junaid, 2004).

The curriculum, though not documented, was very elaborate embracing all aspects of human development. These ranged from mental broadening, physical fitness, moral uprightness, religious deference to good social adjustment and interaction. There was emphasis on mastery learning, which also features in contemporary educational process. Individual training included the learning of certain virtues such as honesty, respect for other peoples' property and rights, and the dignity of manual labour, hard work, productivity, self reliance and collective orientation towards the maintenance of the existing social order were emphasized (Esu and Junaid, 2004).

The curriculum embraced both skills and intellectual training. On account of the form, which also referred to as vocational training, learners were taught farming, fishing, weaving, cooking, hunting, carving, knitting, building of houses, mat-making and forging local farm implements. Different societal issues constituted political traditional education. For example, young ones were taught rules and regulations governing family, village and the individual, relationship between members of society and villages. Intellectual training on the other hand included the study of local history, legends, poetry, reasoning, riddles and proverbs. Those who excelled in these areas were highly revered in the society as their expertise was of immense benefit to their society. An individual's intellect in these directions was developed to enable him fit into such professional groups as rain makers, herbalists, hunters, cult leaders and priests, custodian of the cultural history and heritage (Sunal, 1998; Esu and Junaid, 2004), in other words known as oral historians.

Mode: The main method of teaching in the traditional education system was learning by doing and storytelling which was employed effectively in teaching local history to the young ones. The process of inculcating in-depth knowledge and understanding of the ethics and principles of traditional medicine, carpentry, sorcery, or cultism was restricted to certain families and training for these was done through apprenticeship system. Practical objects were handled by the learners during the course of their training. Assessment of learners' performances was on a continuous basis (an idea that is being revisited in contemporary educational system today). A practical test relevant to the learners' experiences and level of development was the final examination (Esu and Junaid, 2004).

As pointed out by Esu and Junaid (2004), most of the features of African traditional education system are prominent in the contemporary educational system. For example, people who studied certain trades or vocations spent a specified period of time and at graduation through a ceremony were given either tools or materials to start their own trades. It seems that the idea of specified period of training, awarding of degrees or diplomas or certificate and convocation ceremony is derived from the traditional system of education. How to meet the needs of African society in current parlance was a major concern of traditional African education (Obebe 1993, cited in Esu and Junaid, 2004). Education was functional and relevant to social life or realities of the community (Fafunwa, 1980).

Equal opportunities were provided for adults, females, males and children alike in all areas, academic, recreational, vocational, and social. Hence, there was no problem of unemployment as men and women were engaged in meaningful activities which they lived on. Traditional African education system was an indispensable factor for the smooth integration of the growing children into society (Fafunwa, 1980).

Importance of Oral History in Contemporary Times

Oral tradition is the body of information concerning history, culture and environment of a people at any given time and space. This information is often obtained through the words of mouth. It is also a set of verbally transmitted pieces of information about the experiences and worldviews of a people. These experiences and worldviews are preserved in the memories of the group of people and are transmitted from one generation to another (Ogundele, 2000,

p.14). Oral tradition remains an indispensable cultural heritage management strategy among pre-modern and pre-historic Africans which continues to be relevant in contemporary Nigeria. Most oral traditions obtained through ethnographic studies have been confirmed by archaeological and historical findings (Fasuyi, 1973). The clan and village heads, kings, chiefs, deity priests, aged/older men and women serve as repositories and custodians of their oral traditions. They include traditional proverbs, tales/dance by moon lights (known as *akukoifo/egwuonwa* among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria), adages, lullabies, poems, riddles, incantations, praise songs such as *oriki*, recitals of traditional religions like the *Ifa* verses among the Yoruba of western Nigeria and other facets of their individual community's cultural heritages. Oral tradition has proved to be a useful instrument to professionals like the archaeologists and ethnographers in locating and identifying cultural heritage sites/areas for further studies and preservation. Cultural heritage is, however limited to man-made artifacts and ideologies (Eluyemi, 2002).

However, oral history is the systematic collection and study of historical information about past events through interviews conducted with people who participated in or observed these events. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. Oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyze them, and place them in an accurate historical context. In oral history projects, an informant or narrator recalls an event for an interviewer who records the recollections and creates a historical record. Oral history can be understood as a self-conscious, disciplined conversation between two people about some aspect of the past considered by them to be of historical significance. The conversation takes the form of an interview. Nevertheless, oral history is basically a dialogue. Oral history also refers to information gathered in this manner and to a written work (published or unpublished) based on such data, often preserved in archives and large libraries. Oral history has become an international movement in historical research. There are many ways of creating oral histories and carrying out the study of oral history. Though their meanings differ, there is a connection between oral tradition and oral history. While oral tradition refers to the repository of cultural heritage and knowledge, oral history is a body of knowledge created by scholars of history through collection of oral recounts from custodians of oral tradition, that in themselves experts in that area.

Oral history is an aspect of oral tradition that deals with recording, preservation and interpretation of historical information, based on the storyteller's personal experiences and opinions. It often takes the form of eye-witness account about

past events, but can include folklore, myths, songs and stories passed down over the years by word of mouth. It is however, supported with **epic** narrations and genealogies. Whereas epic narrations represent accounts of the exploits of a hero who really existed and who played a major role in a people's history; genealogies are the detailed histories of a dynasty or a people. Epic stories and genealogies are often sung by Griots with a musical instrument. They can be very detailed and specific, providing historians with numbers, dates, and important names (World Affairs Council of Houston, 2019). Oral history was 'the first kind of history' according to Paul Thompson in *The Voice of the Past*, a key publication in the re-emergence of oral history. For centuries the use of oral sources in understanding the past was commonplace. Thucydides, the Greek historian writing in the 5th century BC, made much of the accounts of eye-witnesses of the Peloponnesian Wars, 'Whose reports', he claimed, 'I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible'. By the time Bede came to write his *History of the English Church and People*, completed in 731 AD, he simply noted his thanks to 'countless faithful witnesses who either know or remember the facts'. Even as late as 1773 Samuel Johnson expressed a keen interest in oral histories and oral tradition in his study of Scottish beliefs and customs (Oral History Society, 2018).

In a nutshell, in spite of the weaknesses attributable to oral history such as; Oral traditionists are men, and thus there is a gendered bias, difficult to cross-check, mixing up facts, inaccurate figures, exaggerations, not precise in detail, imprecise periodization, etc, oral tradition has contributed immensely to historical writing in the modern times in the following ways:

It makes the collection of history easily accessible in view of the fact that gathering information by the historian does not involve much work. In every community, town or village in Africa, one can get some elders who are ready to give the traditions and historical events in the area. The historian in one way or the other, only need to contact knowledgeable informants and respondents for the necessary information needed. Secondly, it serves as the main source of history. Thus, in the absence of other sources, oral tradition becomes one of the sole sources of writing history. In a situation where there are no written records or other pieces of information like personal diaries, minutes of meetings, journals etc. the historian often relies to a large extent on the information provided by oral tradition to compile his findings. On the third note, oral tradition has helped to confirm historical facts from other sources. For example, it helps the archeologist to confirm their findings thereby throwing more light on the findings of the history of a place. Again, the archaeologist would have to be directed by a story from the local people before he goes to excavate the site. Therefore, without oral

tradition, the archaeologist's work becomes difficult. Subsequently, oral tradition helps the historian to determine historical trends and events. Through the comparison of several oral traditions, the historian can eliminate biases, inconsistencies or inaccuracies in the written records they are using, to come out with an accurate historical account of the past. Even the interpretation of archeological finds is difficult without oral history because artifacts are both anonymous and fragmentary and requires the help of oral history. More so, oral history has played a significant role to assist in the reconstruction of African history, this is because Africans have relied on oral traditions to preserve their history for centuries. It is again, the only living source of historical reconstruction because it gives room for further questioning and analysis of the information given to ensure its validity or truthfulness (Adu-Gyamfi, and Ampadu, 2019).

Communal Oral Historians as Professionals

The **Griot** (pronounced "gree-OH") is a storyteller and oral historian in West African culture. He is the social memory of the community and the holder of the word. Griots, also called jeli or jali, are said to be the holders of African history centuries before the colonizers found their way into the continent. The existence of griots helps put to rest the notion that Africa had no history prior to the coming of the colonial rulers in the 15th century. The Griot is the keeper of facts and important events of his time. It is his responsibility to pass this knowledge on to future generations, as well as that of past times passed down to him by his ancestors. Originally the Griots were court musicians who sang at weddings, naming ceremonies, and religious celebrations. They later evolved into advisors to nobility and messengers to the community. They sing songs of praise for their leaders and recount the great deeds of ancestors and the history of the society. Griots are also advisors, ambassadors, negotiators, mediators and advocates of the king to his allies and noble families. They are rewarded for their service to individuals and the community. Their fee varies and ranges from a few coins or a blanket to more substantial payments depending on the audience and the skill and popularity of the storyteller. In West Africa, Griots have been practicing their craft for hundreds of years. Griots are described as "the all-seeing, all-knowing eyes of society." There is a spiritual and ethical dimension to their performances and it is believed that special forces are released through the spoken or musical part of their performance. The griots were always present during the meetings of the royal courts to help make final decisions; often they would settle complicated disputes amongst families or among rulers preventing unnecessary fights or wars. They also kept records of births, deaths, wars and

marriages of their society. They kept records of men who went to war and counted them after war (World Affairs Council of Houston, 2019; Johnson, 2018).

Griots are historians, praise-singers and musical entertainers. They are the guardians of the knowledge of their people's ancestry and genealogy. As history may never be written down, the Griot is crucial to keeping records of the past. Griots are entrusted with the memorization, recitation, and passing on of cultural traditions from one generation to the next. The Griot is called upon at important events, during which he recounts a family's genealogy playing his Kora, or other musical instruments, such as the Ballafon. During these ceremonies, the youngest Griot acquires new knowledge. For instance, in the time of Emperor Sundiata, Griots tutored princes and gave council to kings. They were educated and wise, and they used their detailed knowledge of history to shed light on present-day dilemmas (World Affairs Council of Houston, 2019).

On the mode of training of the griots, account has it that the art of being a griot was passed on from older generation to a younger generation usually within a family. It is believed that being a griot was not an occupation picked up by just anybody. The griots of particular societies were families that are believed to have been part of the founders of the society or chosen by the gods through special rituals. Once a child is born, preferably a male child, he starts going through the training process and working closely with the older griots. They learnt the ways of the older griot by sitting through rituals, learning songs and following the griot for ceremonies. The life of a griot was solely dedicated to the practice hence he could hardly be involved in daily or social activities (Johnson, 2018).

Oral traditions, among many African peoples, are more complex, better-organized forms of recording history than the stories and legends of some other preliterate societies, which place it under the custodian of trained experts. Not every person can play the role of community history repertoire, because traditional controls in the form of training and taboos have served to guarantee the reliability of historical accounts. "Palace historians" and griots often occupy hereditary positions, and the training of custodians of a society's history usually begins at an early age; special occasions such as coronations, burials, births, and other rituals present opportunities to perfect their arts. Stringent sanctions are attached to any distortion of historical accounts. The fact that in such societies crimes and punishments are communal and that physical and spiritual influences guide social compliance provides added checks against manipulation of accounts. This to a large extent, accounts for why oral traditions have been

successfully employed to reconstruct the history of many societies in Africa, and Igboland-Nigeria in particular (science.jrank.org., 2019). Besides, given their level of professional accounts of community history, whose proficiency is not in doubt, once an oral historian moves into a particular community, he/she is usually directed to those community history experts, and little wonder African oral tradition as both source and as a method of historical construction (Egharevba cited in Afigbo, 1997).

The Role of Community Oral Historians as Reservoirs and Curators of Indigenous Historical Scholarship

This section presents the argument that it was the valid and plausible historical accounts of communities by experts in the community who are custodians of the community history that the Africanist history scholars used in the reconstruction African history of which Igbo history is one. In fact, African and Africanist historians have professed the value and reliability of oral traditions for the reconstruction of the history of African peoples. African university scholars have indeed gone further to argue that weaknesses of oral tradition as a source of historical reconstruction is in itself not worse than those of other sources of history, including written records. Hence, various processes have been developed for the mitigation of these weaknesses by the methodical gathering and treatment of oral traditions. This has also involved the conceptualization of oral tradition and the classification of the genres that make up oral traditions. Each of these typologies has peculiar treatment types (science.jrank.org., 2019).

It is no longer a hidden fact that because bulk of African history is unwritten, the Eurocentric scholars derided Africa as having no history except the history of Europeans about Africa. Thus, Some European authors had assailed and even doubted Africa's historical heritage; these include Professor Trevor Roper, Hegel and Seligman. For Trevor-Roper "Africa had no history prior to European exploration and colonization ... there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness", her past "the unedifying gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe" (Trevor-Roper, 1963: 871). Hegel, in an apparent attempt to damage any positive opinion of Africa, once asserted that "Africa is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit" (Hegel, 1956: 99). Following his denial of association of the whole African continent with any kind of civilization, in his Seligman wrote brazenly that the "civilizations of Africa are the civilizations of the Hamites, its history is the record of these peoples and of their interaction with the two other African stocks, the Negro and Bushmen" (Seligman, 1930, 96). According to

Chimee (2018), what Seligman was positing in his thesis is that the other two “races” were incapable of achieving anything without the Hamitic influence. His espousal of the myth of the superiority of light-skinned people was only a part of the European prejudice ubiquitous in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, hence his penchant to debase and denigrate them.

The absence of written records in much of Africa posed a great challenge to the historical reconstruction of her past, and this was what spurred African scholars to evolve and insist on the use of oral history in reconstructing it, not minding the gaps inherent in this medium. The pioneering works of Kenneth Dike – *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta* (1956) followed by Saburi Biobaku – *The Egba and Their Neighbours* (1957, based on a 1951 thesis) relied mainly on gathered oral traditions and have survived much historiographical scrutiny to remain national historical classics. Substantial works on East African history have also depended on the collection and use of oral traditions following the pioneering works of B. A. Ogot, Jan Vansina's seminal theoretical work, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, articulated the major theoretical advances for the defense of the use of oral traditions in historical reconstruction. The case for oral tradition was further taken up in his more recent study, *Oral Tradition as History*. Vansina, however, not only makes a case for the validity of oral tradition in historical reconstruction but has produced historical works that fully utilize the method. These include *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Kongo 1880–1892* (1973) and *The Children of Wool: A History of the Kuba People* (1978). Vansina's influence as the foremost theoretician of oral tradition historiography is not in doubt (science.jrank.org., 2019).

Thus, appointed appointment of Professor Dike in 1956, the first African Director of a History Department at University College Ibadan, from where he rose to become the first African Vice-Chancellor of that university marked the turning point of effective use of oral tradition to reconstruct African history. He blazed the trail on not only institutionalizing African studies and historiography, he's was a major breakthrough in realizing the dream of a rebirth of African historiography using oral history for the reconstruction of Africa's past. Having domiciled oral history in African historiography, attempts made to discredit oral sources as useful tools for the reconstruction of the history of preliterate societies in Africa collapsed under the weight of this new Pan-Africanist consciousness and movement of historical rebirth. Dike believed that subjecting oral history to systematic criticism and supplementing the resulting residue with evidence from written documents after the fashion of Western historiography, as well as with

evidence derived from archaeology and other ancillary historical sciences, would put old-style African history through a process of rebirth (Afigbo, 1984: 3). In his presentation at the International Congress of Africanists in Accra (Ghana), he spoke about “the rediscovery of Africa’s past, and a re-orientation of the world attitude to African continent and its past” (Dike, 1962: 5). Dike’s research and publications had a deep impact on Africanist scholarship, like removing a veil and unlocking Africa’s door to her history. Soon researchers began to publish wonderful accounts of various aspects of African history, through the use and deployment of oral evidence.

In order to achieve this feat, Dike developed a two-pronged approach: first, African history must be the history of African peoples and not merely the history of their invaders from Europe and Asia; secondly, studies of European contacts in Africa, where European archival materials remain the major source, should focus on the role played by Africans in the events that have shaped the continent (Dike, 1965). On the whole, the high point of the success of registering African historiography in the context of oral history could not have possible without the role played by those variously known as trained custodians of community history, specialized repertoires of Community history, the griots, community trained historians who are versed in the knowledge and transmission of local history. Hence, if in the perception of some scholars as represented by Egharevba (1968), oral tradition is treated as history itself and not merely as a source of history, then those who revealed these histories of the communities to the university scholars who have credited with the oral history are oral history scholars and professional in their own right. Chukwu (2001) had confirmed in a study that every village in Igboland has certain individuals who have achieved respect and recognition due to their acclaimed knowledge of history and in most cases; the people are consistent in their reference to such individuals. This represents an echo of professionalism attributed to special informants of oral history.

Conclusion

The study has been able to show case the fact that oral history is borne out of the collections from oral tradition which was sourced from communal repertoires, griots, informants. It is the contention of this work that in as much as these community oral translators are presumed to be non-literates in the Western formal education, but given the critical and rigorous means of their training in a highly but informal but systematic mode of pre-colonial education, they are worth addressing as historians in their own right. The study arrived at this

premise having reviewed critically, the pre-colonial African education in terms of its nature, mode and curriculum as well as the training given to the traditional historians as custodians of the history of the people. In most cases their narratives are valid and plausible strands of history which has eminently aided the present day academic historians in the reconstruction of African history. For the fact that not everybody in the society can recall the history of their people in oral form, then those vested with responsibility of accurately narrating the communal history are in themselves professionals. Besides, traditional education was highly professionalized as each student was placed under the mentorship and tutelage of experts. Hence, rather than merely pay attention to the academic historians as professionals, the source of these oral histories should also be acknowledged as historians since they contribute to scholarship of history as well.

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