

**AFRICAN HISTORIANS<sup>1</sup>:  
THE SIGNIFICANCE AND THE POLEMICS OF  
THE APPLICATION OF ORAL TRADITIONS IN  
THE WRITING OF AFRICAN HISTORY**

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**ABSTRACT**

*As from the late 1950s as well as early 1960s when African countries achieved self-determination from colonial rule, the study of African history equally assumed a state of manumission. Overtime, with respect to learned articles, Textbooks, and a few popular works, African historians came to life-active innovators of their own history. At all times, there from, writings by Europeans, viewed from Afro-Centric perspective, revealed unexpected information about African history. However archaeological finds became recognized as indeed the creation of ancient Africans, and not the Europeans or any outsider for that matter. Subsequently, African Historians realized that oral traditions transmitted from past generations and recounted by African traditional Historians were valid as well as significant sources for historical reconstruction. As a historian, of African history, I am making a clarion call that all African historians working in whatever period of African history in whatever area to make the extra effort necessary to tap the special historical resources of oral tradition for the reconstruction of the segmentary societies. It is necessary to constantly remind ourselves that much as oral tradition could be enriched through cross-checking as well as supplementation with archaeological, linguistic and other sources, the value of oral tradition as a source of history is independent of these ancillary techniques.*

**Key words:** African Historians, Oral Tradition,



Polemics, African History, Segmentary Societies.

## INTRODUCTION

### **The Significance of Oral Tradition in the Reconstruction of History of the Segmentary Societies**

This article has attempted to critically highlight the significance of oral tradition in Africa and the polemics of the application of oral traditions in the writing of African history. It seeks to discuss the challenges of the use of oral traditions in historical reconstruction and the debate of historians in favour of its use.

Writing on “Oral tradition and the History of Segmentary Societies” contended as follows:

For one reason the scratches I had recently for having ventured into the field of Efik traditions of origin and migration in my more youthful days is enough to warn me that using oral tradition could be like stepping on a steep and slippery road whose end is also invisible. Though I must confess it is not yet quite clear to me whether my crimes consisted in transgressing the rules for handling oral tradition or in having the temerity to cross ethnic boundaries in the pursuit of historical knowledge<sup>2</sup>.

From the contention of A. E. Afigbo above, it is clear and unquestionable that the field of the methodology of oral tradition has become incessantly and continuously specialized as well as technical. The crux of the matter is that ever since the publication in 1961 of Professor Jan Vansina’s epoch-making book, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, the study of the methodology of oral tradition has become a minor academic industry amongst historians, psycho-historians and anthropologists. Different aspects of the problems posed by the use of this family of historical evidence-dating and chronology<sup>3</sup>, reliability, methods of collection and preservation, techniques of analysis



(synchronic, diachronic and multi-disciplinary) continued to be probed in learned Journals higher degree theses and printed monographs.

It is significant to note that the science of oral tradition may not be as exact and universal in its application as the methods of mathematics or physics. Each user of oral tradition, like each user of documentary or other sources of history, still has, and always will have, to decide for himself, and in the light of criteria and parameters acceptable to him, what use to make of each corpus of tradition and of each event or strand in the corpus. Similarly, in the utilization of oral tradition for historical reconstruction, as in the use of other sources of historical evidence, it is improbable and doubtful that there will be any supplantation for the very personal dialogue between the historian and his sources or for that personal resolution of this dialogue which is of the very import of the historians craft and vocation. In the meantime, the methodology of oral tradition remains and shall always continue to remain an aspect of historical methodology. This requires that we bear in mind Jacob Burckhard's warning that "of all scholarly disciplines history is the most unscientific, because it possess or can possess least of all the assured, approved method of selection... Every historian will have a special selection, a different criterion for what is worth communicating, according to his nationality, subjectivity, training and period<sup>4</sup>.

### **The Value of Oral Tradition to Historians**

All historians of African descent in recent times affirm and recognize the value of oral traditions for their work, as well as the necessity for the careful collection of such traditions during the present dynamic times. However, this wide-ranging as well as laudable concern for the methodology of oral tradition has not only aided to point out the centrality of oral tradition as a source for the history of segmentary



societies in Africa in the pre-colonial era or even in the colonial era. Besides, it has equally made all would-be users of this source to be alert to its major challenges. Infant their collection demands a lengthy and rigorous stay in the area of study, thoughtful personal relations, and careful methods of identifying and recording traditional histories. As a recent survey of writings by those who have used oral traditions indicates, the process of analysis and interpretation can be complex and difficult<sup>5</sup>. This is so even if persons come from the area whose history they are investigating and know it reasonably. Professor E. J. Alagoa, Ijo himself, spent considerable time in 1964, 1966-7 and following the civil war, collecting oral traditions in the Niger Delta for his work *A History of the Niger Delta*, and worked with a linguist in developing the transcriptions of the tapes<sup>6</sup>. There is no gain-saying the fact that E. J. Alagoa, himself is a great authority in this area of oral traditional study. Similarly, another instance that may be useful for explaining the problems involved in the task: Jan Vansina's study of Kuba history was one of the first to reveal the latent aspect of oral traditions for African historical reconstruction. Although it was not an easy exercise on the whole.

Several years were spent investigating, recording and studying traditions from over 1,400 sources<sup>7</sup>. Twenty years after this research, and after the findings had been published, Vansina felt it necessary to re-examine the entire process. Other researches among neighbouring people had revealed that Kuba traditions of origin and migrations were unreliable historical indicators though valuable for a study of deeply held world views. On the other hand, he also found that a review of the traditions gave him more evidence than he had gained from his original analysis<sup>8</sup>.

In a speech at the University of Liberia in 1974, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Calabar, Professor



Anyandele commented that “...the problems posed by African studies are primarily African and, therefore, demand an African solution”, and that “in historical appreciation and use of Oral Traditions, Oracles, myths, legends and works of art... African scholars have an advantage over others and are more likely to get at the truth than non-Africans”.

### **The Challenges of the Application of Oral Tradition**

In spite of the fineness and refinements in the applicability of oral traditions to African historical reconstruction there is still considerable opposition to any reliance upon them. Infact the prejudice is uncalled for as well as unjustified. Western historians, just as conscientious have made considerable effort to record historical information in the immutable form of the written record, so too have many segmentary societies or non-literate peoples carefully sought to preserve some aspects of their own historical traditions by other means. The status of scholarship in oral tradition maybe weighed both from a study of the work done in the field as well as from an assessment of the attitudes to oral sources by insiders and outsiders. In this context, insiders refers to scholars working actively in the field while outsiders refers to those who can claim no specialist knowledge or interest, nevertheless, one who takes delight in reading the material that emerges. Put differently, the general reading public or consumers of the output of the scholars. On the whole, the interplay of these sort takes the form of criticism of the work of the specialist workers in the field by other scholars in related fields, with the disposition of the consumers acting as a rough guide to the state of its acceptance or of the discipline.

Every study applying Oral tradition in the fifties as well as sixties, began with the apology relating to the dearth of written records which had resulted in the



historian having are course to oral traditions. Invariably, the scholar was expected to state the degree of his skepticism of oral traditional sources for historical reconstruction, and was also required to accept that he intended to treat them with extreme caution. If there were available written materials, however, even those who pride themselves as heavy-weights in the use of Oral traditions did not utilize them. If there were written materials at their disposal. Obviously, there was more boost than action in the practical work of collecting oral traditions on a systematic scale as well as using them as genuine and valid historical sources.

Furthermore, in the seventies, the critics of oral tradition have not given up, but have merely changed their techniques into being very crafty and of undermining the increasing confidence of the historian. The African historians have begun to realize greater commitment hence the confidence assured that there effort has acquired some degree of legitimacy among the generality of historians as well as consumers of historical writing based on oral traditional sources. Yet they cannot over-look new elements of skepticism and new problems of methodology that arise from the accomplishments that they have made from the work of the pioneers of the fifties as well as the sixties. Against this backdrop, it is settled that the practitioners of oral traditional history and the historical reconstruction of segmentary societies are no longer afraid that they will be ostracized from the councils of the historians, although they cannot shy away with or totally get rid of the feeling that they are regarded with some measure of skepticism. Whatever is the case, they still have to answer to severe attacks on their discipline from insiders in related disciplines. The deeper we get into the study of oral traditions, within the discipline itself, the more broad the field of enquiry opens up new challenges that appear as quickly as old ones are taken care of. This is one



demonstrable and incontrovertible evidence of its viability as well as the vitality of the field as a historical discipline.

### **AFIGBO'S AND OTHER HISTORIANS DEBATE ON THE USE OF ORAL TRADITIONS IN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION**

A. E. Afigbo, in dismissing the spurious argument on the use of oral traditions and new assaults on its use contended as follows:

I make this observation not because consider the quest for sharper techniques for handling oral tradition futile or pointless, but because I believe that it is futile and pointless to insist on our waiting until the sharpest techniques possible have been evolved before we begin to face the actual process of using oral tradition to write our history<sup>10</sup>.

A lot of people have written on the challenges of oral tradition and on how these should be grappled with than have actually used oral tradition as the major or only source in an extended historical recapturing. One feels like insisting, parodying Marx's phraseology, that the methodologists have written eruditely on the use of oral traditions; they point however is to actually use it in historical reconstruction<sup>11</sup>. At this juncture, we shall turn to the polemics and the various controversies associated with the use of oral tradition in there construction of the history of non-literate or segmentary societies.

If anybody thinks that oral tradition has become fully accepted and needs only to go on to sharpen its tools and do a better job, he should read a recent assault by Clarence-Smith of the University of Zambia<sup>12</sup>. Clarence-Smith was of the view that certain new ideas in historiography developed in Europe by a growth referred to as the school of the Annales have made oral tradition obsolete in Africa. He went further to hold that the only reason why African historians continue to



use oral tradition is the sentimental one of a source independent of European activity, that is, its being “truly African and uncontaminated by colonialism”. In his view, oral traditions are invalidated by three defects. First, oral traditions are “essentially present signs and not past signs preserved by writing.” Second, “oral traditions also lack absolute chronology”. According to Clarence-Smith, this is not a minor secondary fault, but one sufficient “for rejecting oral sources from the methodological field of the historian.” And third, “oral traditions are extremely selective in their content”. However, an African historian desirous of reconstructing the history of non-literate societies should not be dissuaded by this or in fact the view of this critic because the whole argument from the fore going is not only biased as a result of his personal idiosyncracies and as well tainted with Euro-centric embellishments.

Moreover, there is the fact that it seems that the more techniques are refined as well as the rules tightened, the more the scales are presented as being weighted against the use of oral tradition in the writing of the history of segmentary societies. In the view of some critics, historians should leave oral traditions to the anthropologists and sociologists, and where a historian is himself trained in these disciplines, he should still use oral tradition only in conjunction with written European sources. In the view of academics in the field of anthropology and sociology, who feel that historical reconstruction solely on the basis of oral tradition is not possible, or in any case should not be attempted, particularly in non-literate societies except other kinds of evidence—archaeological, linguistic, documentary, demographic, geographical—are available as a check and supplement.

Thus, writing in 1953, Dr. Peter Lloyd, a social anthropologist, expressed the view that historians should make no move in the use of oral tradition, specifically in the use of myths and legends, until





sociologists have shown them the way. Only after sociologists have outlined the functions of myths, he said, can the historian find his direction, especially when it comes to identifying where distortions are likely to have taken place. Also, only with sociological guidance would the historian be able to “assess better their value as historical evidence<sup>13</sup>.”

Similarly, G. I. Jones, himself a social-anthropologist, distinguishes between two main kinds of oral tradition – those which refer to the recent past (TRRP) and those which refers to the distant past (TRPP). In the view the TRDP “may provide valuable historical material when used in conjunction with other written European records”. This must mean that where “other written European records” are not available, the TRRP are without value as historical material. And indeed the effect of the word “may” in the formulation is that it is possible that even in the presence of “other European records” the TRRP may still not provide valuable historical evidence.

Coming to the TRDP, Mr. Jones is emphatic in his denial that these could be of any historical value. According to him the TRDP “cannot help us”. They are no substitute for history and are best regarded as systems in which a very limited number of items are manipulated to explain or justify existing institutions and social groups. “It is of course possible”, he concluded:

*To construct a hypothetical history using such items as would appear to support one's conjectures, but it would be quite impossible to prove it, unless corroborative archaeological or documentary evidence could be obtained<sup>14</sup>.*

Still much later in 1971, Professor Robin Horton writing in his very persuasive manner added the weight of his opinion in support of this point of view. Explaining the form taken by his contribution to History of West



Africa edited by J. F. Ajayi and Michael Crowder he wrote:

*It is not for nothing that I have entitled this chapter “Stateless Societies in the History of West Africa” rather than a “History of Stateless Societies in West Africa”. For in the present state of our techniques, the difficulty of writing a “history” of the same kind as you will find in the chapters of this book which deal with the great pre-colonial states are virtually in superable.*

Such a history, he said, would become a viable proposition only “when we are in a position to consider the indications of oral tradition along those of linguistic maps, culture trait maps and the results of archaeological work”.

Unfortunately he pointed out, only in the area of the linguistic mapping of West Africa has reasonable progress been made. In the other two-fields progress remains at best rudimentary<sup>15</sup>.

Thus, the critical question to put to these methodological clinicians relates to their conception of history – its meaning, its methods and its aims. Jones for example makes a distinction between “hypothetical history” and history that can be “proved”. What, infact, is the meaning of “proof” in the social sciences and the humanities? Does it have the same meaning as “proof” in the exact sciences? Do historians, even when they are working in a literate culture whose history is closely documented, “prove” the perspectives of the past they construct or do they merely illustrate these by the judicious selection of examples? Have historians of the Allied powers proved that Germany was indeed the aggressor in the Second World War? Have German Historians proved that Hitler was personally responsible for the blood chilling genocide against the Jews? <sup>16</sup>With all due respect, Mr. Jones’s distinction between “hypothetical history” and



history that can be “proved” shows a basic misunderstanding of what historians try to do<sup>17</sup>.

However, the right answer to put to these methodological clinicians is that the differentiations they make are irrelevant. We require in Africa work on centralized and a segmentary societies. Besides any contribution to one or the other should be given due credit and not castigated or pilloried. Once we recognize that history is not an exact science but a science of probabilities, and that we should put to the sources available to us questions consistent with their intent and concern, we shall be better able not only to exploit full the promise of oral traditions, but also to advance their construction of the history of segmentary societies of pre-colonial Africa.

Jan Vansina has directed his theoretical work towards making an academic case for the validity of all types of oral traditions in all communities. The historical career of Jan Vansina, on the other hand presents a different depiction. Jan Vansina, in his reconstruction of African past understood the exigency of space. He was not unaware of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture of which he is a product. He knew that the best way to study a non-literate society (non-literate in the European sense) is not to enmesh oneself in speculation. It did not escape his intellectual mind that every society has its own way of recording events of her past. In his study of the Bakuba, Jan Vansina demonstrated that oral traditions as “testimonies of the past which are deliberately transmitted from mouth to mouth” and from generation to generation and as oral literature are legitimate sources of historical knowledge. They can be classified as formulas including titles and names, poetry; lists including genealogies; tales, commentaries, as well as precedents in law. These sources, he goes on to indicate, can yield “tribal history, village and family history, or royal history”; with tribal history recounting the migrations and the formation of chiefdoms, village and family history telling how villages were formed and



how clans spread through the country and split themselves into sections and royal history describing the evolution of the Kingdom through time<sup>18</sup>.

At this point in time, we shall discuss the prospect of oral tradition in the reconstruction of African history. The most viable option and direction in which oral traditional studies need to go is to strengthen their interdisciplinary base. The practitioners of oral tradition in African history have always stated a commitment to interdisciplinary research<sup>19</sup>. It was, indeed a pleasure to read in the very first number of your Calabar Historical Journal, a call for the use of insights from Geography in the interpretation of traditions of origin and migrations<sup>20</sup>. In the study of Niger Delta history for example, we have attempted to account for the influence of the environment in the direction of development taken by communities of common origin settled in different ecological zones<sup>21</sup>.

Further, we have begun to follow up the survey of the oral traditions with systematic archaeological survey. Excavations have already taken place at five sites in the Eastern Niger Delta following indications, at Onyoma, Ke, Ogoloma, Saikiripogu, and Okochiri. The team of workers has included a historian, archaeologists, and a palynologist<sup>22</sup>. The indication is that the radiocarbon chronology will go a long way towards placing the relative chronology of the oral traditions in proper perspective<sup>23</sup>. This in its turn, will be correlated with the glottochronology and other proto-linguistic contributions from professor Kay Williams<sup>24</sup>.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study must conclude on the note that the goal in reconstructing the history of the segmentary societies, no matter the source, should not be to reconstruct for them the same heroic kind of history written for the great states rather the goal should be to write history that is as close an approximation to their own experience as is



possible within the sources and techniques available. In the final analysis, this is the utmost ambition of History whether conceived as an art or as a science. Thus, in line with the ultimate goal of history, one must ensure that the questions which are put to the oral traditions of any society are consistent with the intent as well as the concern of the people's perception of their world. In other words, one does not have to succumb to the prejudices of scholars from societies in which the tradition and use of oral tradition has been so long replaced by writing, that they can no longer appreciate its continued vitality and relevance in Africa.



## END NOTES

1. The term “African Historians” is used throughout to mean professional historians who are Africans.
2. For these scratches, see E. A. Udo, “The Ibo origin of Efik by A. E. Afigbo, *The Calabar Historical Journal*, vol.1.no.1, June, 1976, pp. 154-172.
3. Dr. D. P. Henige, *the Chronology of Oral Tradition*, (Clarendon, 1974).
4. J. Burkhardt, *Judgements on History and Historians*, (George Allen And Unwin Ltd, 1958), p.158.
5. Among the Journals surveyed were: *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*; *History in Africa*; *A Journal of Method*; *International Journal of African Historical Studies*; *Journal of African History*, *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*.
6. JanVansina, “Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba, I. Methods”, *Journal of African History*, I, I (1960), 47.
7. JanVansina, “Comment: Traditions’ of Genesis”, *Journal of African History*, XV, 2(1974), 320, passim.
8. Professor E. A. Anyandele, “African Studies and Nation Building”, in Final report of Seminar on African studies, July 18-19, held by the Institute of African Studies under the Directorship of Dr. Jabaru Carlin, University of Liberia, Monrovia, Liberia, Dec 27, 1974, 38-39.
9. A. E. Afigbo, “Oral Tradition and the History of Segmentary Societies, in Erim O Erim and Okon E. Uya (ed.), *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History*, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing, Co. Ltd, 1984), p.55.
10. JanVansina, Comment, 320, passim.
11. W.G. Clarence-Smith, F. Braudel, A note on the “Ecole Des Annales’ and the historiography of Africa”, *History in Africa, A Journal of Method*, vol. 4 1977,



- pp. 275-281; See also the reply given by Jan Vansina for oral tradition (But not against Braudel), *History of Africa*, vol. 5, 1978, pp. 351-356.
12. P. C. Lloyd, "Yoruba Myths: A Sociologist's Interpretation", *Odu* 11, 1955, pp. 20-28.
  13. G. I. Jones, *The Trading States of the Oil Rivers*, (O.U.P.1963) p.24.
  14. R. Horton, "Stateless Societies in the History of West Africa" in J. F. A. Ajayi and M Crowder, (ed), *History of West Africa*, vol. 1, (Longman, 1971), pp. 78-90.
  15. See A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War*, (Penguin, 1971) and the debate generated by it. See in particular Taylor's "Second Thoughts", in this edition.
  16. A. E. Afigbo, *Oral Tradition*, p.57.
  17. Jan Vansina, *Recording the Oral History*, pp. 45-46; He has also analysed in this article how Oral Traditions are preserved and the aims for doing so; how to tackle the problems inherent in oral traditions; and the fact that written document is to the literate societies.
  18. E. J. Alagoa, "The Interdisciplinary Approach to African History in Nigeria", *Presence Africaine*, No. 94, 1975, pp. 171-183; See also E. J. Alagoa, "The Relationship between History and other Disciplines" *Tarikh*, vol. 6, No. 1, 1978, *Historical Method*, pp. 12-20.
  19. A. E. Ntukidem, "Geography and Historical Methodology with Reference to the Study of the Origin and Migration of Non-literate People", *The Calabar Historical Journal*, Vol.1, NO.1, 1976, pp.1-28.

