

ORAL TRADITION AND HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION IN IGBO LAND, SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

History is a body of knowledge derived from the past lives of a society. The reconstruction of these past lives relied on the objective use of various sources which include among others, oral or verbal evidence, written evidence and material remains. Unfortunately, most scholars of euro-centric culture as they are often referred to, are propagating a mistaken belief that objective historical reconstruction is only possible through the use of written documents, thereby relegating the use of other sources of historical information such as oral traditions to the background. This misconception about the sources of historical information is certainly proving dysfunctional in the reconstruction of history particularly in areas like Igbo land that suffered from lack of conventional or written records. This paper sees oral tradition as a veritable tool which must be harnessed and objectively used for a sustained historical reconstruction, both in literate and non-literate societies of the world. It therefore showed that oral traditions like other sources of History are invaluable in historical reconstructions especially in the reconstruction of the History of non-literate societies.

Key Words: History, Historical reconstruction, Oral tradition, Objectivity and Material remains.

Introduction

What is Oral Tradition?

Syntactically speaking, oral tradition is a two word phrase. While oral means "spoken rather than written," tradition means a belief, custom or ways of doing something that has been in existence for a very long time among a particular group of people. It follows therefore that oral tradition could semantically mean spoken beliefs, customs or ways of doing things that have been in existence for a very long time among a particular group of people (Hornby 2010). This definition implies that oral tradition comprises all cherished customs, belief systems and or ways of doing things

which were handed down from one generation to another for a very long time through spoken words.

Uzoigwe (1977) defines oral tradition as that aspect of history which is not written down. Its major characteristic is that it has no author as it is passed from one generation to another through tradition. Eulogizing the contributions of oral tradition in the Historiography of Africa, Uzoigwe remarked oral tradition as African's main contribution to world historiography.

Ajayi (1962) in Uzoigwe (1977) supports the view on the values of oral tradition as a major tool in the reconstruction of Africa's past when he writes:

Africa, Historiography has changed the course of historical writing which now doubts the sufficiency of written sources alone for historical writing even when written sources appear abundant.

Vansina (1968) as cited in Uya (2009) defines oral tradition as all verbal testimonies which are reported statements concerning the past. This definition according to Vansina demonstrates three important elements. First, since they are verbal testimonies, they are passed down by words of mouth. This means that oral tradition can either be spoken or sang. The second attribute of oral tradition is the fact that it is a reported statement. In this case, the informant may or may not be an eye-witness of the event that he is talking about. Perhaps the importance of this attribute lies in the fact that oral tradition is used as the memory of a society, since it could pass chains of testimonies from one generation to the other. The third attribute lies on the control, which exists in all societies that make for near accurate preservation of traditions consistent with the sentiments of the group. In a nutshell, we can note the fact that oral tradition is one part of the larger historical documents known as oral evidences.

However, there are three major characteristics which can be noted for any historical fact to be classified as oral tradition. The first is that such testimonies concerned must be oral. This oral characteristic distinguished these categories of historical sources from written sources and from material objects. It therefore follows that oral evidence or testimonies simply refer to information delivered by words of the mouth by being spoken, sung, chanted, recited or even delivered through the African talking drum. The second characteristic of oral evidence or testimony is that such evidence or testimony must concern the past. The third element concerns the mode of transmission namely from one person to another through time and the informant himself is not an eye witness to the incident or event. He only relies on information that has been passed on to him. Oral tradition is indeed the most important oral evidence in historical reconstruction. Oral traditions cover virtually every aspect of life in society except that they may not provide quantifiable data or adequately mirror unconscious change. However, they have proved really invaluable in the reconstruction of the socio-economic and religious life of African communities (Uya, 2009). Oral tradition accounts for the way things are and often the way they should be and have assisted people in educating the young ones. It has also helped in teaching important lessons about life in the past (story telling).

Types of Oral Tradition

Oral tradition as a source of history is very important in all societies not minding the reliance of some culture on written records and accounts. History must be known and understood for a man to function properly in his own community. Little wonder why all traditional societies developed their own ways of preserving the memory of their past and each society develops its own ways of passing information from one generation to another (Uya 2009).

However oral tradition can be categorized according to Vansina (1968) based on four principles which include the verbal structure, the form, the manner of transmission, the purpose and significance of the tradition in a given society. It was perhaps based on these principles that Vansina came up with the following classification of oral traditions

1. **Formulae** Titles, names, slogans, didactic formulae and ritual formulae.
2. **Poetry** Historical, religious, panegyric, ceremonial, and personal poetry.
3. **List** This exists in form of place, names and personal names
4. **Tales** This includes myths, legend and Lore
5. **Commentaries** This consists of legal precedents, explanations and glosses, occasional note and comments.

The formulae as noted above can appear in names, titles and slogans; they may be didactic or ritual in terms of their purpose and significance. They are fixed in form and in words.

Poetry, on its own, includes songs as well. This is because in most societies, it serves as song for the group. It may be official or private poetry. It most often deals with the religion of the people and can also be used in celebrating well-known individual in the group, that is, individual with heroic deeds. Poetry is also used in celebrating kings. It is recited on appropriate occasions like the crowing of kings, pouring of libations and even in the celebration of the arrival of a new born baby.

Lists are known in most quarters as epic. Normally they present a very high level of difficulties of assessment. The list can include place names which can yield or give important information, thus a name here is being more than a name of the societies, because it may signify something. In this regard, name of a place can suggest the importance of that place in the minds of the people. Individual or personal names equally tell or suggest very much about the circumstance in the family, when the child was born. Genealogical lists, as well as the list of kings are extremely important in history, since it is used to establish chronology.

Narratives are also a form of oral tradition. They can be historical narratives used in celebrating well known events in the history of a group or society. Narratives can be artistic, where they are artistic, emphases tend to be more on style than anything else.

Commentaries are mainly legal precedents or explanations and glosses occasional notes and comments.

On the whole, oral tradition includes eye witness accounts and rumors. The tradition may concern the super-natural, the activities of deities, spirits and semi divine heroes, culture, artifacts and institutions. Ethnological stories explain the local

environments and the nature of animals full of myths, tradition, tribal and family history. Stories about characters are all included.

Any Lore of whatever nature that is passed down verbally from one generation to another may be considered as oral tradition. This is also what is known or called "the heritage of the ears". In the main, the word oral can take the form of songs, folk tales, proverbs or poems. As we have emphasized earlier, it must always possess a verbal character that is words of mouth.

The Importance of Oral Tradition

The importance of oral tradition is such that begins to unfold as soon as a discussion on it begins. Consequently, some of the importance we are trying to elucidate on are what had already been mentioned in passing in the introductory part of this work. Therefore, this should not be misconstrued, as a regurgitation of what has been mentioned earlier in the work.

The importance of oral tradition in the complex art of historical reconstruction cannot be over emphasized. To begin with, those who can no longer collect and collate their tradition have expressed it with deep regret. This regret is evident in the new Encyclopaedia Britannica (1990, Vol. 23,) where it is asserted that the stark fact about the western literature is that the greater part of it has perished. Some of it has been forgotten before it was possible to commit it to writing. Fire, war and ravages of time have robbed posterity of most of the rest, and the restitutions that archaeologists and palaeographers could achieve from time to time are small. A good analysis of this assertion reveals that even though the remnants of these traditions are being recovered through archaeology and palaeography, those that were forgotten before they were penciled down represented a landmark loss. The historical importance of oral tradition can further be ascertained with what McCall (1969) described as Schliemann's faith in the historical validity of Homer's epic poems. The historicity of the Homer's *Iliad* led to the finding and excavation of Troy as an archaeological site. As McCall had further aptly put it, Schliemann's work was as much a validation of oral tradition as it was for archaeology. The implication of this analysis is that Homer's *Iliad* (epic poems) were composed of mostly Greek tradition and its historical importance is located partly in the fact that it was exploited by the archaeologist not only in finding a site but also in the reconstruction of the social context in which the excavated artifacts were made use of.

In his interesting narrative, Equiano (1787) gave a description of the tradition inherent in his Igbo homeland before he was captured and taken into slavery. Part of his narratives was the importance of facial scarification of a man, the *ichi* mark. According to him, the *ichi* mark was a mark of grandeur conferred to very important personalities. Probably as a result of retroactive problem which may have led the new language (English) to interact and subdue his original language (Igbo) he wrote the word *Mgburuichi* as *embrenche*. This fact was substantiated in the work of the British captain, John Adams whose voyage to Africa brought him into contact with the Igbo people. According to Adams (1822) the Igbo word for a gentleman is *Breeche*. Another scholar that threw in support in the direction Equiano did was James Africanus Beale Horton, a Sierra Leonian of Igbo parentage, perhaps the son of a freed slave. Horton

(1868) described the tradition of facial scarification of the Isu-ama Igbo people as *Itshi* and that those who bear the mark were referred to as *Mbritshi*.

The historicity of these narratives is located in the fact that the facial scarification culture made its appearance in the myth of origin of the Nri people. Oral Tradition or what Obiechina (1994) eruditely referred to as story of the land (Akuko Ala) provides the thread of memory as also the thread of evidence which links the past to the present and helps to define the relative significance of things. The Nri myth of origin is a thread of evidence of Equiano's Igbo origin.

Another evidence that portrays the importance of oral tradition is the Igbo-Ukwu findings. After many years of the existence of the Nri myth of origin and after hundreds of years of Equiano's interesting historical narrative, Thustan Shaw, a famous archaeologist uncovered an ancient "bronze figuring" of human head showing facial scarification as they appeared in both Nri myth and the famous Equiano's narrative. This archaeological finding by Shaw validated both the Nri myth and Equiano's narrative. On the other way round, these traditions helped Shaw to reconstruct the social condition in which his discovery, the bronze figuring existed. Shaw's belief, as cited in Eyo and Willett (1982) that "the Igbo people who occupied the area he uncovered those bronze figuring had no king, but priest who wields political influence was based on the local tradition of the area".

In a similar vein, it was by exploring the narrative of Equiano that Acholonu (2008) was able to trace the home town of Equiano to *Isseke*. She subsequently debunked the claims of Vincent Carretta in which he argued that Equiano was not born in Africa. This singular land mark achievement by Acholonu implies that much more could be achieved by recollecting the tradition of the various societies for reconstructing their histories.

Mazikana and Moss (www.uneseo.org) In their scholarly argument remarked:

although oral traditions may be collected as an academic exercise and subsumed under the general umbrella of oral history, in their very nature they have no inherent additional social value in contributing to the social cohesion, dynamic evolution and durability of the culture they represent.

This is not so, the role of oral tradition goes beyond their perceptions and assumptions. This can be exemplified with the popular *Orji Ezinihitte Mbaise* cultural festival which brings the original sixteen autonomous communities that made up Ezinihitte together on the first day of every New Year. The social cohesion which this festival has sustained is derived from its connection to the local tradition of origin of *Ezinihitte Mbaise*. Any attempt to embark on the historical reconstruction of *Ezinihitte Mbaise* must include a careful examination of the different versions of their traditions of origin. This would throw enough light on the relationship that made it possible for these different autonomous communities to participate in one festival, *Orji Ezinihitte Mbaise*.

Mazikana and Moss further revealed that oral traditions are to a large extent identified with societies lacking a written tradition but they exist in highly literate societies, even those with impressive archives of written records. Their most important

archival function however, has been in documenting those societies without written records, throwing light on the historical, social, economic and cultural development of such societies. In most cases, it has been the only way in which the past of a society could be reconstructed and recorded in written form for archival preservation. The salient point made here is that whether in the highly literate or in the societies lacking written tradition, oral tradition is functional in the reconstruction of the social, economic and cultural history of the society.

Oral tradition helps us to reconstruct the intellectual history of a people of the past. Intellectual, according to the New Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English is the ability to understand things, needing serious thought in order to be understood. Therefore, intellectual history is that aspect of history that deals with how the people of the past understood their environment. It covers the serious ideas about how to overcome their natural and environmental challenges. Most Arts and symbols are a depiction of event and beliefs. These arts and symbols do not talk but most often, their meanings or what they represent are contained in the local tradition of the area where they existed. The bronze figuring of human head with facial scarification excavated by Shaw at Igbo Isiah in Igbo-Ukwu could not explain itself. However, the mentioning of facial scarification in both the Nri myth and the Equiano's narrative was enough evidence to understand the meaning of that bronze art or what it represented in the culture it existed.

Even when some of the tales that appear in oral tradition are said to be imaginary, fictional or superstitious; their reality could be located in the fact that they are all intellectual construct of the people of the past, used in either to regulate the moral conduct of the people or to entertain them. Through oral tradition, we have come to understand what occupation a people engaged themselves in. For example, the yam crop featured prominently in both the Nri tradition and that of the Ezinihitte people in Mbaise Imo State, Nigeria. This goes a long way to suffice, that yam was the major staple among the Igbo before the introduction of cassava by the Portuguese in the 15th century. Nwosu (2011) contends that cassava, which later became the major staple in Mbaise area was said to be a native of South America while Isichei (1976) had it that "more intensive research has shown that West African yams are indigenous". This means that in an attempt to reconstruct the economic history of the Igbo, these traditions should be considered very functional and be given good attention.

Edward (1994) states that historical source is any material in whatever shape, form or size where study, analysis or interpretation, knowledge of the past action or events may be gained. In further clarification of the importance of oral tradition, McCall (1969) argues that "there can be no doubt that individuals and all the things that defined the milieu are important to history and we must therefore strive to obtain a history of societies and their outstanding individual". That is why oral tradition is important among the unwritten sources.

Problems of Oral Tradition

Every material or source, upon which an historian lays his hands to employ into use in the process of historical reconstruction, has its own problems to present. And to do well in historical scholarship means to possess the ability to overcome these problems and challenges that afflict our sources without indulging into laziness of outright condemnation of some sources at the realm of imagination. In most cases, the problems that confront one source of history are, by careful examination, shown to be general problems associated with most, if not all the sources.

Consequently, it becomes imperative to note that one of the major problems that clog the wheels of oral tradition is illusion that whatever that is written is more reliable than oral testimonies. This illusion was propagated by mainly Eurocentric historians. Like we have always said this is illusory and can lead the oncoming historian off from the main parts of objective history.

It was against this backdrop that Ryder in Fage (1970) deciphered that:

too often, it is assumed that anything written must be more reliable than verbal testimony, but every historian knows that a written document needs to be subjected to exactly the same sort of scrutiny as to the circumstance in which it was produced as does any piece of oral evidence.

This is because both the written and the unwritten source particularly the oral evidence can be affected with human bias. More often than not oral traditions have been accused of distortion, and it is not far from the truth. But the question remains, is there no other source of history that can be distorted? This only portrays anti-historical tendencies of oral tradition. The historicity of oral tradition is further illuminated by the scholarly argument of Bronislaw Malinowski cited in McCall (1969) that traditions or at least some traditions, are the social charter, but this does not eliminate their usefulness for history. He reiterated that traditions are subject to distortion, but if we were to throw out everything subject to distortion, historians would have few document of any kind to work with. The task is to find out how to detect distortion. It is factual to say here that it is not only oral tradition that can be distorted, both the written and the unwritten sources get a fair share of this problem.

To insist on the idea that once a document is written it is reliable is a continuous build-up of what Carr (1961) regarded as nineteenth century fetishism of fact. That is the belief that facts speak for themselves. In a more truthful clarification, he said that no document can tell you more than what the author of the document thought, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others think he thought. None of this means anything until the historian has got to work on it and deciphered it. People collaborate with medical Doctors to collect a medical report showing that they have been receiving medical care for a period of time either to escape from being punished for absconding from duty or to achieve what is not due to them. If we succumb to this reliability of written sources future historical scholarship will fall into a pit of ink that the big ocean would drop very little water to wash.

Historical reconstruction is broad cheated and all-embracing therefore, no source should be ignored for a problem that is general to all the sources.

The tradition of oral storytelling under which the older generations were reared is fast eroding by the avalanche of social change induced by external forces of western civilization. Most of the present elders who should have been the custodian of these traditions were detached very early from the rural to the urban areas, where urban lifestyles and pursuits of western type of education have disrupted the flow of these traditions.

One of the means through which these elders or the present day parents have been detached is by paying more attention to the learning of English Language or other languages, foreign, particularly to African communities. Language is the vehicle that conveys tradition. Therefore, the erosion of language passes death sentence on oral tradition.

Another important factor that negatively affects the status of oral tradition in historical reconstruction is located in its documentation. Just like Ryder in Fage (ed.)(1970), McCall (1969), Eluwa (1988), Usman (2006) and Smith (1987) aptly observed that if this work is to be raised to the level of scientific enquiry, no tradition must be recorded without attaching to the record all available information about the recorder himself and about the person from whom it was recorded. In addition we must have information about the custodian of tradition. Not only do we want to know what sort of people they are, but also how they came about to know the tradition they recount. This may involve the recorder in difficult and protracted biographical enquiry but without such information, the tradition recorded remains an anonymous document of unknown provenness.

Thus, it appears that the heavy responsibility rests on the shoulders of the recorder who must be of proven capacity to carry it on. However, the problem associated with this procedure is not only found in its tedious nature, but also in some research methods. One of the commonest means through which these traditions could be recorded is through research projects conducted in our institutions of higher learning. But in most colleges of education such as Alvan, in which we ply our trade, students are often prevented from using methods other than the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing method. This method does not make provision to accommodate all the required information about recorded tradition. APA only allows the inclusion in the body of the work of the name of the person from whom the tradition was recorded. But in a pure historical method of research, provisions are made in the footnotes, end notes and in the note on sources to accommodate the available details about oral tradition. Therefore most teachers or lecturers who passed through these colleges of education may not really understand the rigor and rudiments involved in the collection and collation of oral tradition for historical purposes. And this may deceive some scholars into carrying a mistaken belief that oral tradition is useless in historical scholarship.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to elucidate on the concepts, types, importance, and problems of oral tradition. It is discovered that some of these problems have often misled some scholars into believing that it is not useful in the difficult work of historical reconstruction. In conclusion therefore, most of these problems which affect oral tradition as a source of history also constitute problem to other sources including the written source. In this case, these problems should most properly be regarded as general problems to the sources of history and not to oral tradition alone. As it is explained here, oral tradition is used in both literate and non literate societies. This depends on the aspect of history which the researcher wants to reconstruct. Since it gives us a good insight on the economic and intellectual history of societies, oral traditions relevance in historical reconstruction cannot be denied.

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