Orality and Historiography: A Perspective on the Changing Contours of African History

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the methodological role of Orality in African historiography will be re-evaluated to ascertain how colonial conceptualisations of historical legitimacy (ontological truth) were grounded in the existence of written documentation. As such, African oral traditions have often been relegated to myth, folklore, or some other form of non-historical knowledge. By utilising the works of Jan Vansina, Paul Thompson and Walter Ong, this article tracks the development of oral tradition from a contested source to an accepted form of historical methodology. The paper claims that oral narration does not only fill gaps in archival sources, but also fundamentally challenge the textual biases that are embedded in existing historical practices. The paper also argues that through an emphasis of community memory, performative action and interpretive fluidity, orality has redefined the boundaries of African historical knowledge. The combination of oral and written forms of historical knowledge provides a more inclusive historiographical framework through which to challenge the colonial epistemologies of history and broaden the overall global discourse on history.

KEYWORDS: African historiography; orality; oral traditions; postcolonial studies; memory studies

"The word is parent to all deeds." (Niane 1)

INTRODUCTION

The notion of Africa as a continent possessing a 'history' has been a long contested one within Eurocentric historiography. Until recently, Africa was depicted as a mainland that was outside of historical developments, a continent supposedly without archival memory or documentary continuity. Such misconceptions can be easily negated since there are numerous evidences that posit a completely different picture of Africa before the world. The existence of a substantial body of archaeological, linguistic, and cultural evidence testify to the existence of rich and highly complex socio-cultural systems in the African continent, whose history is preserved and transmitted through various kinds of knowledge systems. The paper contends that orality is an important form through which African history has been handed down, safeguarded, and understood. Historically, Africa has been associated with 'orality' in such a way that the absence of written records was taken as the absence of history, thus implying that the two went together. The paper rejects such notions, and traces the history of orality from precolonial vitality through colonial suppression to postcolonial revival, showing how orality reshapes historical understanding in the African context.

In so far as remapping the history of Africa or for that matter African historiography is concerned, two pioneering landmarks were Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* (1921) and Carl Christian Reindorf's *History of the Gold Coast and Asante* (1895). These books combined ethnographic observations, traditions of origin, and detailed historical narratives constructed from a combination of personal experience and oral research. Instances such as these compel modern African historians to not only acknowledge the significance of written sources but also to ponder upon the prejudiced European term 'oral' and its significance in revamping African History.

The pioneering generation of African historians did not completely negate the central significance of written sources. But if the size of

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the continent is taken into account, such sources appear too trivial to be taken for granted. In a situation like this, historians often imagined the kind of history that will emerge if it was based on the documentary record laid down in most parts by Europeans and the Islamic conquerors. They therefore began to suggest that the idea of evidence need not be solely synonymous with the written texts. Their own experiences in pursuing their research led them to the conclusion that 'oral tradition' might be taken seriously.

Defining the Oral Tradition and its Literary Relevance

Oral tradition, however, must not be confused with 'oral history'. Oral history implies the recording of an individual's own memories while oral tradition can be defined as the passing down from generation to generation of events that extended into the deep past. As a matter of fact, if Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Norse *Sagas*, and *Beowulf* can be the typical oral narratives of Western culture, why then, the African can't have any of those? Is it that just because they are African, their oral tradition is bound to be recognized as some queer babbling in the dark? Or is it that their oral tradition has no historical impetus for their 'being' African? Oral traditions had been recorded by Johnson, Reindorf and other pioneering African scholars in their own respective research. Arguments were forwarded that these traditions could be read in the same sort of ways as historians read written documents, a claim extended by Jan Vansina in *Oral Tradition* (1965). This was a bold claim and a brave one which seemed to subvert the conventional historical practice. This kind of attitude in fact facilitated the historian's task of recapturing 'history from below'. However, oral traditions were far from being straightforward and were rarely reliable vehicles of factual information. Nevertheless, these accounts undoubtedly serve useful in getting a composite picture of Africa as a continent which does have a history.

In 1993, the Program of African Studies Seminar at Northwestern University in the United States announced that its theme would be Material Inscription in African Cultures. The choice of the theme reminded that for the majority of people in Africa, writing has never been the principal means of expression or communication, and that many other forms of material inscription such as ritual, dance, communal performance, sculpture, and weaving would take precedence over writing in any comprehensive historical description of African culture. This truth makes it even more significant that in the contemporary representation of Africa a concern with written inscription has been so dominant. Although almost all accounts of African cultures insist on the importance of oral culture, there is little doubt that for all practical purposes the oral has been displaced by the written in the majority of texts concerned with African cultures written in the last twenty years. This, despite the fact that for the vast majority of the people of Africa literacy is still an unachieved ideal, and that for most African people the oral world of speech and non-written cultural exchange is the world they inhabit on a daily basis.

Foundations of Orality in African History: Oral Tradition versus *ahl al kitab*

The idea of the written text represented a fundamental sign of superior cultural value and identity. The Arab cultures of East Africa and of the sub-Saharan Sudanese kingdoms stressed the importance of the text in identifying the Muslim from the indigenous peoples in ways significantly like later European practice. The Arabs saw themselves as part of a unique group, the people of the book (*ahl al kitab*), and so the idea of stability of the sacred material inscription of writing is central to their conception of culture. It is writing which seems to be the common ground as the scholarly accounts of the spread of Islam and Arabic culture and those of the later European colonizers. For this reason, the patronage of writing has been a powerful and recurring weapon in African history from the earliest times. At a later date, when Europeans first encountered Africans in large numbers with the development of the West African slave trade in the eighteenth century, it is significant that the implicit test of the absence of civilization was the lack of an effective writing system.

Without this sign of inscriptive permanence, the complex and subtle oral cultures of the region were rapidly discounted and overlooked in favour of the cultural values carried along as baggage by inscriptive forms of the invasive cultures. It was the absence of writing which, for both major invasive influences on indigenous cultures served to justify the

development of theories of racial and cultural superiority (Msiska 145).

African Oral History: A Brief Outline

Although oral tradition has been utilized in the study of many fields of history, in recent years it has been associated especially with the history of sub-Saharan Africa, and more especially of sub-Saharan Africa during the pre-colonial period. When the serious study of African history at universities in Africa, Europe and America began in the early 1950s, from the outset, great emphasis was placed on the use of oral tradition. This reflected the conviction that there was for Africa a relative dearth of contemporary written sources. There was an element of exaggeration in this view since sub-Saharan Africa was not by any means wholly non-literate. Written sources survived for many African societies—most obviously, Islamic societies with written sources in Arabic. However, it remains true that this sort of written documentation is limited. Oral tradition therefore remains the only source for the history of some African societies, and the only form of internal source for many. It is however intriguing that the use of oral tradition as a significant source had, in fact, been a normal feature of historical research, back to the days of the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BC; and was also characteristic of both Christian and Islamic historical scholarship in medieval times.

The analogy between oral traditions and written manuscripts breaks down because in the case of oral traditions it is highly misleading to think in terms of an 'original' text which is more or less accurately reproduced in the chain of transmission. In oral performance, there is no 'text' to be copied as the text exists in the act of performance. For instance, African griots have been pivotal in shaping historiography as living repositories of West African history, preserving narratives through performance rather than written records. Their oral method emphasized collective memory over individual authorship, embedding history in communal rituals, courts, and ceremonies. Their work underscores orality's rigor, transforming African history from "myth" to credible epistemology.

Methodological Foundation of Orality in African History

There is no history without oral history. It is, after all, the oldest form or even 'pre-form' of history's existence, and with the contemporary possibilities of recording and transmitting the spoken word, oral history takes on greater meaning. Yet it never really ever disappeared. Oral history existed in the courts of kings of various epochs and various cultures where oral tradition preserved knowledge of the past of a dynasty before it was set down in writing. It filled a part of the folk imagination. Orality took on the form of songs as well as the tradition verbally transmitted, dependent or independent of written history. The latter could become dominant in human culture only quite late—only after the onset of universal literacy which, for many European societies did not arrive until the nineteenth century. And it is only quite recently that the skill in handling oral evidence has ceased to be one of the marks of the great historian. However, there are instances like the leading professional historian of mid-nineteenth century France, Jules Michelet who in his *History of the France Revolution (1847-53)* assumed that "written documents should be but one source among many" and that he could draw on his own memory. He realized that official documents could preserve only one side of the political story (Thompson 26).

The method of oral history is also used by many scholars, especially sociologists and anthropologists, who do not think of themselves as oral historians. The same is true of journalists. Yet all may contribute to the writing of history. And for different reasons professional historians are also unlikely to conceive of their work as 'oral history'. Their focus is basically on a chosen historical problem rather than the methods used in solving it. They will normally choose to use oral evidence along with the other sources, rather than treating them alone. The term oral history is itself a contribution to this confusion,

> ... (I)t implies a misleading analogy with already differentiated aspects of history.... Whereas oral history can never be a 'compartment' of history in its own right, it is a technique that could conceivably be used in any branch of the discipline. The title also suggests, indeed invites, another hiving off when in fact it is clear to anyone who has taken oral evidence in the field over any length of time that compiling oral sources is an activity that points to the connectedness of all aspects of history and not to their divisions from each other (Thompson 82).

Traditional Historiography Through Oral Lenses

In oral history, the leading role is played by a person who remains in a clearly evident and rather intimate relationship with the incidents depicted in the story. In this case, the standard function of the narrator is performed by a 'witness'.

Oral history stemmed from a feeling of coldness and emptiness: a lack of direct contact with the human experience of the past, precisely as it would exist in the consciousness of the participants of particular historical episodes. This void was created by the usurpation of history as an institutionalized academic discipline (Kurkowska xii).

Oral history is likely the most democratic discipline; it is neither contained solely within history, nor certainly even limited to academic history. It is however intriguing that while engaging in oral history, the speakers or group of speakers are 'subjects' and not 'objects' of analysis; they are rather participants in a dialogue about the past.

The articulation of power with history in the domain of writing and reading within the colonial formation is one of the problems that Gareth Griffiths examines in his essay "Writing, Literacy and History" (Griffiths). He argues that writing was the means by which imperial and colonial projects in Africa were legitimized and entrenched. Griffiths further notes that the privileging of writing over orature has 'continued to inform the allocation of cultural value in the continent', since the new African elite are themselves products of a history and experience which has always associated writing with 'civilization' and orature with 'primitivism'. The interrogation of the relationship between writing and history in Griffiths's essay suggests that one can "no longer safely operate with a calibration of African history in terms of the familiar designations such as pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial, for they mask the extent to which processes of cultural and ideological production are repeated or indeed re-presented at different historical moments" (Msiska 4).

Contextualizing Orality and African Historiography

At its core, African historiography has long been seen grappling with a written bias inherited from colonial powers. European chroniclers, armed with pens and prejudices, branded Africa with a sobriquet "the dark continent" devoid of any history, echoing Hegel's infamous claim that it lay outside time. Their archives, missionary logs, explorer diaries, administrative reports, privileged the elite class, often foreign perspectives, muting the voices of the common black people. Orality offers a counterpoint: a vast repository of songs, proverbs, myths, and genealogies that African communities have guarded as their true record even at the cost of their lives. These forms are not static; they adapt, layering new events onto old frameworks, much like a river carving deeper channels over time.

The dearth of written records for postcolonial African history has ensured an important role for oral tradition. Robin Law in his essay "Oral Tradition as History" presents the history of the methodology of oral tradition in African historiography, noting that influential models of interpreting and organizing oral traditions, such as Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition,* are based on the idea that oral traditions are similar to the written text. Law regards it as completely fallacious to take oral tradition as a record of the past and suggests that they should rather be seen as interpretive reconstructions of historical moments they describe, and the contexts in which they are narrated (Law). One of the major implications of Law's remarks on the relationship between oral tradition and literature is that advocating a return to the use of oral traditions is mistaken for there are no unmediated oral traditions, as all tradition "bear the imprint of the moment of their production, the history of transmission and the moment of usage" (Msiska 5).

The bias against Africa, its cultures, history and people, has a long history. The representations of Africa are constructed and disseminated through images couched in a language that tends to over-emphasize the exotic, the pitiful or the primitive while de-emphasizing complex idiosyncratic aspects of African societies that are nameless or unknown in the western world. The current misunderstanding and misrepresentation of African societies and cultures stem largely from the biases ingrained in some of the traditional travel narratives as well as in colonial and missionary accounts. Franz Boas in the very first chapter titled "Racial Prejudices" of his book *The*

Mind of the Primitive Man (1911) states that the descriptions given by most travelers were often too superficial and that very few travelers "understood the language of the people they visited" (28-29). He thus raised the fundamental question of how it is possible to judge a 'tribe' solely by the description of the interpreters. Even when the language of the people is known, the visitor generally remains an unappreciative listener to their tales due to the strong missionary bias impinging upon him/her against the religious ideas and customs of the so-called 'primitive' people.

Colonial Disruptions and Imposed Written Histories: Institutional Shifts

In 1963, the Oxford historian Hugh Trevor-Roper dismissed the history of Africa as meaningless, and argued that "perhaps in future, there will be some African history.... But at present, there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... and darkness is not subject to history" (qtd. in Falola 18). This school of thought, which can be traced to Hegel and beyond, prompted several scholarly responses, including UNESCO's general history of Africa, multi-volume project, of which seven volumes have been published to date, that refuted the proposition that Africa is a continent without history (Falola 18).

In both the Arab and European traditions of knowledge production about Africa, the African subject is generally portrayed as savage and culturally, religiously and intellectually inferior, with a history that only started with their arrival in the continent. In many ways, the legacy of these stereotypes accounts for the neglect of the rich intellectual and literary tradition of Black African scholars and has impeded the objectivity of knowledge production about the continent in general. Therefore, an evaluation of Arab and European tradition of knowledge production is not only necessary but also crucial if the truth about Africa and Africans is to be fully uncovered. African history has been altered by centuries of 'Arabization' (from Arab slavery to Islamization) and 'Europeanization' (from European slavery, colonization to globalization). Yet whether accepted by Africans or not, race continues to be the key defining feature in the eyes of many Eurocentric and Arab-centric scholars. Overlooking this racial reality that has shaped interactions between Black African, Arab and European scholars perpetuates the subjectivity of knowledge production about Africa, and leaves the primacy to those who dominated Africans unchecked and unchallenged. If this tradition continues, then the true story of the 'Islamized', 'Christianized' and 'conquered' Africans will never be told.

The practice of oral history has been a foundational component of the discipline of African history. During the early 1960s, historians and newly independent African nation-states alike became concerned with recovering a usable past—a history that would demonstrate African agency and establish an autonomous sense of identity apart from the preceding period of European colonial rule. Depicting Africa's pre-colonial past consequently became a central goal, although written evidence proved to be scarce. Collecting oral history therefore, became a necessity, and indeed, the richness and ubiquity of African oral traditions that had developed over centuries in place of written records aided in this effort of reconstructing African history. Jan Vansina's *Oral Tradition* was a crucial methodological intervention in this regard. In contrast to the prevailing perspectives of the time that emphasized the objectivity and fundamental importance of written records, Vansina argued for the equal value of oral sources as history. Moreover, for Africa, such evidence offered new perspectives that challenged the distortions of Euro-centrism found in colonial documents.

Assessing Orality and Its Literary Impact

Luise White and David William Cohen in their recent edition of *African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History* argue for a re- evaluation of contemporary oral history. One of their central contentions is that the categorical distinction between written and oral evidence is at times 'overly schematic' (White 12). Their qualitative similarities—particularly as narrative forms –have suggested a common methodological ground, and the mutual interaction between the two needs to be better examined. By articulating a separate distinction between words and voices, White and Cohen aim to cut through these traditional differences. 'Words' refers to the raw material of historical research and the predicaments it can pose. 'Voices' symbolizes the African perspectives and opinions sought within the raw material of words, thus underlining the fundamental goal of retrieving forms of testimony for reconstructing

Africa's past. One can therefore, easily point out the multiple ways in which words can be collected and the variety of means by which such evidence can be interpreted.

Jan Vansina in his classic *Oral Tradition* (1965) divided African oral tradition into four categories. First, there are formulas—learning formulas, rituals, slogans and titles. Secondly, there are lists of place names and personal names. Thirdly, there are official and private poetry—historical, didactic, artistic or personal. And lastly, there are legal and other commentaries. However, not all of these can be found in all African societies. Nevertheless, in most societies there is normally a considerable range of oral evidence. The social importance of some of these oral traditions also resulted in reliable systems for handing them down from generation to generation with a minimum of distortion. However, it is this element of distortion ever present, which raises questions against any 'authentic' oral evidence.

Academic history writing involves assembling masses of verifiable facts and arranging them in a series, generally a chronological one. Some historians may immediately recoil at the use of the word 'fact' to describe historical data. The word is used here to designate empirically verifiable events of the past, distinguishable from rumour, myth, memory and fiction. What is proper to the work of a historian as opposed to that of a natural scientist who is reconstructing, say, the stages of development of a certain species, is the effort to penetrate the thinking of those who were implicated in the events of the past. Arranging the events in a sequence and attempting to re-think the thoughts of those involved create a narrative. Even a historian who spurns story-telling still creates a narrative in some shape or form, implied by the type of facts selected and the sequence into which they are fitted.

Postcolonial Reconfigurations: Integrating Oral and Written Histories

Furthermore, commenting on the psychodynamics of orality, Walter J. Ong (2002) discusses how oral verbalization, in pure preliterate form or in residual form within written cultures, structures both thought processes and expression. The importance of orality in the absence of writing is further stressed by Ong when he talks of 'primary orality'. He defines primary orality as,

> ...the pristine orality of mankind untouched by writing or print which remains still more or less operative in areas sheltered to a greater or lesser degree from the full impact of literacy and which is vestigial to some degree in us all. The noetic processes of primary orality, as we have seen, are formulaic and rhapsodic rather than analytic. As in Homeric epic and to a great extent in classical oratory, particularly of the more orotund variety, this orality operates with the sort of commonplace, formulary expressions, and clichés ordinarily despised by fully literate folk, for, without writing, an oral culture must maintain its knowledge by repeating it. Writing, and even more effectively, print store what is known outside the mind and downgrade repetitive styles. (Ong 5)

The aforesaid remark speaks volumes of the repetitive nature of oral culture, and it must not be forgotten that it is this repetitive nature that has still kept oral culture on the move. Ong therefore maintains that once the psychodynamics of the oral mind is known, primary orality, although in its residual form, still serves as a potent agent in recovering history. Primary orality is a 'pure' form of orality in that unlike secondary orality, it is not media-conscious. Primary orality refers to a pure form of spoken communication in societies untouched by writing or print, where thought and expression rely entirely on sound and memory without any awareness of media like texts. Unlike secondary orality, primary orality remains unmediated and communal.

Importance of Oral Sources in Reconstructing History

In Africa especially, both for political and social history, oral sources play a crucial role. Documentation, although certainly present, is much less prolific than that of societies which became literate earlier, while oral source material is abundant. It has been systematically used by historians of Africa since the 1960s, with an increasingly sophisticated methodology for the establishing of oral traditions which dates back to the sixteenth century and beyond. Initially, these traditions were essentially understood as orally transmitted documents, most valuable when they survive the onslaughts of time. These were more effectively used in

charting the political history of relatively strongly organized African kingdoms, particularly in the period preceding their nineteenth century colonization. Glaring examples are David Cohen's *Womunafu's Bonafu* (1977) and John Lamphear's *The Traditional History of the Jie* (1976) which are remarkable histories of small forest and hill people in Uganda. Both these texts stand as foundational works in harnessing African oral histories to illuminate pre-colonial political dynamics and migrations. Cohen meticulously dissects the narrative traditions surrounding Womunafu, a 19th-century leader in Uganda's Bunafu community, to reveal how authority emerged not through static hierarchies but via fluid alliances, marriages, and spirit possessions, challenging linear views of power by cross-verifying oral accounts against contextual silences and contradictions. In the like manner, Lamphear (1976) pioneers a rigorous fieldwork methodology among the Jie, reconstructing their origins and pastoral expansions from systematic oral collections, demonstrating how these traditions encode environmental adaptations and inter-ethnic conflicts with chronological precision. Together, they elevate oral sources beyond mere folklore or storytelling, modeling an ethno-historiography that captures the "moving contexts" of lived memory while at the same time cautioning against unexamined assumptions of unbroken transmission chains.

Perhaps the sheer ingenuity required to establish the elementary patterns of settlement and political power in pre-colonial Africa from oral sources diverted energies from exploiting their equal potential for the development of recent African social history, but the balance is now shifting, with oral history interviewing used by historians studying environmental, religious and family history. (Thompson 99)

Synthesizing Change

African historiography has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from monophonic colonial narratives—dominated basically by written colonial archives that silenced indigenous voices—to dialogic frameworks that honours the dynamic nature orality. Oral traditions, once dismissed as myth, now anchor hybrid histories, as seen in postcolonial literature like Chinua Achebe's reclamation of Igbo oral archives and Wole Soyinka's valorisation of a Yoruba past. This shift recognizes history not as fixed text but as a performative dialogue, where griotic repetition and communal mnemonics reshape linear chronologies into fluid, collective truths. By integrating oral and written modes, African scholars have forged narratives that can now contest Eurocentric linearity, affirming orality's enduring vitality amid modern disruptions.

These changing contours extend beyond Africa, challenging global historiographical paradigms rooted in literate biases. Orality's emphasis on performativity and context disrupts universalist models, inviting methodologies sensitive to non-Western epistemologies—from Indigenous American storytelling to South Asian bardic traditions. In an era of digital archives, African innovations like multimedia oral projects model inclusive global history, countering archival silences and fostering epistemologies of the marginalized. Ultimately, such perspective enriches world history by validating multiplicity over singularity. By centering orality, one does not only decolonize an African past, but pioneers an ethical future for global scholarship.

CONCLUSION

To conclude this study, a considerable amount of academic attention has focused on closely related subjects such as the politics of memory and oral literature, often written by anthropologists or specialists in oral performances. Historians of Africa have also produced an important corpus of oral history. Here, some of the classic works wrestle with how to extract dateable historical facts from oral performance. With this ultimate aim in mind, the earlier literature on this subject tried to identify the structure of oral traditions and to understand their inner logic. This method imitated the work of classical philologists and biblical scholars who compared text variants to determine the original versions (Ellis 21).

This approach, however, has considerably enriched our knowledge, but they also constitute a dilemma. To consider a postmodern oral performance of stories about the past only as a degraded copy of an earlier authentic version is to ignore its value as a live interpretation of history. Oral narratives are not just conveyors of historical memory but also producers of social meanings that are constantly changing. When the interrelationship of memory and interpretation is appreciated,

African historiography can break away from the traditional textual model and evolve into a more pluralistic and self, critical historical practice.

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