



ORAL TRADITION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This paper examined the importance of oral tradition and archaeology as history and sources in historiographical reconstruction. European colonial administrators and their African apologists had in 'programmed ignorance' argued that Africa had no history owing to the non-availability of writing. This work is aimed at showing convincingly that oral tradition and archaeology are viable non-written sources to reconstruct and authenticate the history of man about the past in any society. To explain how, why, when and where man lived, show continuities and changes in intra and inter-group relations while measuring the level of advancement made in society, oral tradition and archaeology will certainly be the guides. Archaeology is in the province of reconstructing man's past from his physical and cultural remains which have survived to date. History studies the past in the living present while oral traditions are the transmission through generations of oral accounts of man's past through word of mouth by either eyewitnesses or non-participants in the event recounted. Oral tradition and archaeology are related as valid and invaluable sources of information about the past. Using the interdisciplinary approach, this work found that for a balanced reconstruction of the human past, oral traditional historians and archaeologists must complement other disciplines to be able to have an objective and more realistic outcome of the reconstruction. Archaeology adds concreteness and a more secure chronological base to cultural reconstruction which if allowed to oral tradition alone, may lead to a mere fabrication or half-truth. Both oral tradition and archaeology as indispensable sources of reconstructing the history of a people must integrate aspects of other disciplines to give concreteness to the study of the past. Both concepts remain very germane to any meaningful reconstruction of the past of African people, notwithstanding the challenges of these historical sources.

Keywords: History, Oral Tradition, Reconstruction, Interdisciplinary, Archaeology.

Introduction

According to Alagoa the past may be dead but cannot be buried. Some people are willing to act as undertakers and wish the past is disposed of for good. Others have made it their business to see that the past does not completely disappear from our consciousness and these are the historians and archaeologists (Alagoa, 1979). History has shown that Africa is the home of man following the discoveries by the Leakeys in Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania. This means that Africa has been the bee-hive of human social, economic, political, and cultural activities from time immemorial. However, African history in the colonial and the immediate post-colonial periods have seen the continent's monumental historical achievements undergo tremendous ridicule and great distortions by Eurocentric scholars and some African

sympathizers who think Africa was an irrelevant corner of the globe.

Herodotus was a master in the art of oral history and the study of oral testimonies of the recent past by eyewitnesses and participants brought down through chains of transmission over generations of informants. Herodotus discovered the African oral tradition in combination with other sources of historical evidence, possesses merits, representing past realities, not present privileges, politics, or today's social status alone. The Homeric epics were all Greek oral traditions preserving the history of the people.

Between the 16th-18th centuries, Africa's historical dignity and personality were assaulted by uninvited colonial invaders who denied Africa



ever had a historic past if not the past of European activities in Africa. Scottish philosopher David Hume said *'I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the white. There was never a civilized nation of neither any other complexion than white nor even any individual eminent in the action of speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no science'* (cited in Alagoa, 1979:10-11). In the 19th century George Hegel, a philosopher of history opined that "it is manifest that want of self-control distinguishes the character of the Negroes. This condition is capable of no development or culture and as we have seen them to this day, such they have always been. At this point, we leave Africa, not even to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the world; it has no movement or development to exhibit" (Hegel, 1956, cited in Alagoa, 1979:11).

In the 20th century, specifically in 1963, an Oxford Regius Professor of modern history Hugh Redwald Trevor-Roper (1914-2003) was responding to his students, when they demanded to know why African history courses were not studied in Oxford. This renowned historian in a British Broadcasting (BBC) interview said 'Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But as of present, there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness... darkness is not a subject of history'(Trevor-Roper, 1963). To him African societies come and go 'battles and conquests, dynasties and usurpations' but it is all meaningless because it has no direction (Appiah, 1998). How can these scholars be so hopelessly uninformed? Prejudice, bias, and programmed ignorance in these scholars' perspectives of looking at Africa were nothing other than racial hatred, cultural superiority, the idea of the 'white man's burden' and parochially alluding to civilization with writing. If this is true about Africans in their lenses, then there was a time when states in Europe had no history because writing was not invented with the creation of man. Man is over two million years and writing is five thousand years old. This shows quite a long period in the past that written records cannot cover but can only be resuscitated through oral tradition and

archaeology.

Africa was relegated to the background of civilization as an appendage of European societies and any study of it will, as Trevor-Roper will say, is 'prying into the unrewarding gyration of barbarous tribes in picturesque at irrelevant corners of the globe'(Trevor-Roper, 1963) thus using history as a tool to legitimize European authority and domination on the 'Dark Continent' waiting to be discovered by Europe. These views by European scholars were erroneous and hinged on basic perspectives and methods of studying and reconstructing the past based on written documents alone.

However, in the 1950s with the rise of African Studies and Black Power Movements in America came an explosion in the study and interest of African history and culture by Africans to assert and prove that Africa has a glorious past (history of self-assertion) and that great leaders and empires had risen in the continent before European advent in the 16th century. This led to the Ibadan, Legon, and Makerere schools of history in which African students were taught a reasonable dose of history to further show that African societies were never static nor incapable of positive change and leadership. African scholars were ready and did debunk Newton's opinion that 'history begins when men begin to write' (Newton, 1919). This Eurocentric prejudices toward African history conceal the true history of Africa from the world at large. Think about the irony of this bias that; the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were rightly regarded as essential sources for ancient Greek history but African oral tradition, the collective memory of peoples which holds the thread of many events marking their lives, was rejected as worthless.

African scholars started digging into the prehistory of Africa of which archaeology will supply a bulk of the information into the distant past that writing cannot cover. Attempts made toward discrediting 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 a historical renaissance. Dike had opined 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).

Africa had developed systematic ways of preserving her past, not in written form but through word of mouth, pictures, arts, songs, signs, folklore, drumming, and other means which have been validated by archaeology and other disciplines and from the writings of Arab and Muslim scholars, geographers, and traders like, Al- Masudi, Al-Bakri, Ibn Battuta who visited and interacted with African empires, political leaders and societies and left records of those relations, (Mokhtar, 1981).

Records from *Tarikh-as-Sudan* authored by Rhaman Al-sadi and *Tavikh-al-Fettach* by Mahmud Kati had different perspectives on African societies through their records which were like mines of information for reconstructing the past of Africa based on writing. These Arab records had limitations as they recorded mostly Arab kings and their exploits in Africa and how they had aided the growth of Islam in Africa. No wonder Arab Muslim leaders like Mansa Kanka Musa of Mali, and Askia Mohammed Toure of Songhay were praised but non-Muslim leaders like Sonni Ali of Songhay and Sundiata of Mali were not.

Arabs' and Europeans' perspectives of African history magnified discontinuities and devalued African historical experiences to glorify and exaggerate their exploits and presence in Africa to the detriment of Africa. The consequence is that it led pre-European African history to be discarded and written off, only to be saved by archaeology, ethnobotany, ethno-zoology, and historical linguistics. This Euro-centric approach failed to capture Africa in totality and during the dead hours of colonialism, African scholars schooled in 'historical methods' fashioned by Ibn Khaldun,

Ibn Khaldun, 1375-1378), started interrogating this earlier thesis on the African past and the role of Europeans and Arabs in African history. Dike (1956) and other African scholars Cheikh Anta Diop, (1987) pioneered the new African historiography or historiography of decolonization to effectively contain and combat the threat of colonial propagandists and racial jingoists to African identity, dignity, world view, values, image, and self-definition. This led to the popular saying that until the lions have historians to tell their history in their way, only the exploits of the hunters will always be told. Africans had to start telling their own story in their way. Thus, the rise of oral tradition and archeology as valid methods of reconstructing history and as history. This work will look at oral tradition and archaeology in historical reconstruction, problems, and prospects of oral tradition and archaeology in historical reconstruction, and then conclude.

ORAL TRADITION AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

According to Ian Vansina (1965), oral tradition is all oral testimonies concerning the past that are transmitted from one person to another. His student E.J Alagoa (2014), says oral tradition has three significant elements: the testimonies are oral, it deals with the past, delivered by word of mouth in song chanted, recited or rendered through talking drums, and transmitted from person to person through time. This differentiates oral tradition from rumors. Oral tradition comes in the form of formulae, poetry, lists, tales, and commentaries.

In the nineteen fifties and sixties as continental Africa started getting political independence from its colonizers, African history also assumed independence as Africans can now tell their story by themselves. Africans started making their history as they were made by history. They started by collecting oral testimonies from eyewitnesses, those who participated in the event, and from those in villages whose duty it was as custodians to keep and report village history (community historian). The people recounted the history of their migration and settlement, culture,



genealogies rulers, family, wars, inter-group and economic relations with other groups, and such matters of interest to the historian. Presently, Africa and the world now recognize the sterling importance of oral tradition in writing history and it is used in almost all historical research works. Archeology deals with recovering ancient remains of human activity which are left behind and is used to give chronology to artifacts and what they were used for to determine man's past. Archeology validates oral tradition by providing real dates for artifacts. Oral traditions transmitted from past generations and recounted by traditional or village historians are authentic sources for African historical reconstruction with a major shortcoming of weakness in human memory and dangers of distortion after several generations of transmission.

Oral tradition as a valid and respectable source of historical documents gained prominence from the work of Jan Vansina whose seminal work was on Oral tradition as a source of history at Wisconsin University in 1961. This Belgian historical anthropologist pioneered the study of pre-colonial historical linguistics. Vansina tirelessly worked to develop a historical methodology that would enable researchers to listen closely and critically to language (regional, etymological change), gossip, visions, creation mythologies, proverbs, and music and with an ear to the distant past. He argued that “[a]ny message containing historical information tells us about events or sequences of events, describes a situation of the past or reports a trend”, (Vansina, 1965:70).

Vansina's study of oral tradition helped pioneer the field of pre-colonial intellectual history writing and numerous studies on the importance of using oral traditions to reassess Africa's shifting vernacular, social, and cultural landscapes. Because oral tradition is one of the most important human aspects of African history, Vansina trained Africans like E.J. Alagoa in Wisconsin and encouraged Africans to collect oral traditions, and open museums, archives, and research institutes to reclaim the past. This led to the study of the African past from all perspectives thus making African scholars in the immediate

post-independent era insist that to understand the African past, an inter-disciplinary approach was germane like the works of archaeologists, linguists, botanists, paleontologists, and anthropologists. In all, oral tradition and archaeology remain very useful tools in achieving the goal of a proper reconstruction and validation of the African past. Archeological artifacts produced in the African past, tell the story of African history not of African relations with Europe at the time.

Both oral tradition and archaeology are not easy to collect and examine as they are time-consuming and need a great deal of patience. Alagoa for example spent a lot of time in 1964, 1966-7 collecting oral traditions of the Niger Delta from which he produced his book *A History of the Niger Delta*. Alagoa worked with linguist Kay Williamson to translate languages in tapes from oral traditions collected and also worked with Anozie, (1988) at a site in the Niger Delta to correlate oral information to authenticate his reconstruction. Before 1953, archaeology was a pastime activity for amateur archaeologists (treasure hunters) who all the same made Nigeria to be known as a mine for artifacts to the world. Donald Hartle had listed 400 archaeological sites in Eastern Nigeria and only 14 had been excavated as of 1967 and none in the Niger Delta. It took the effort of E. J. Alagoa of the Rivers State Research Scheme at the Institute of African Studies University of Ibadan in 1971 for archaeological research to start. Thus in 1972 and 1975, Onyoma, Ke, Saikiripogo, (Ewoama), and Ogoloma were excavated. In 1976, Okochiri, and by 1985 others sites in the Central Niger Delta were excavated. Abi Derefaka, N. Nzewunwa, and F. Anozie have also done great excavations in the Niger Delta with Radio Carbon Dates for artifacts recovered, which were documented and preserved. In those sites artifacts such as miniature ritual clay pots called *Tamunobele*, terracotta human head figurines, large *Arc senelis* shells, smoking pipes, and *Kuronama Aka* (leopard teeth) were discovered interpreted, dated, and preserved. From the Niger Delta excavations, a lot has been learned about the way the people lived, adapted, and conquered their



riverine environment in Nigeria.

Afigbo used oral tradition to analyze legends and myths of origin among the Efiks and Aro. Onwuejeogwu, (1987), in *Igbo-Ukwu*, findings show that a dynamic Igbo culture and civilization (in Nri) based on a kinship system that had flourished since about 800 AD, long before the Norman conquest of England. He further used oral tradition to assign chronological dates to king succession in Nri and also used it to relate Nsukka Igbo-Igala relations. Works of literary professionals like Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Camara Laye, and Chimamanda Adiche are sourced from oral tradition with historical leanings. Oral tradition is very vital in history and literature in telling the history of a people and it has acquired a new dimension in African historiography. The main problem in collecting oral tradition is for the scholar or historian to be able to know who to approach and for what knowledge. He must respect the traditions and customs of the people and pay attention to social groups, and the positions of individuals and elders in the society; when the collection begins all the town elders and the traditional historian should be present for clarification of grey areas. There must be consensus and unanimity and all views accommodated and agreed on and recorded.

The process of collecting oral traditions is painstaking, burdensome, and time-consuming. Another serious problem is getting adequate and sequential chronology (dating) as references most often done by correlating calendar dates. So in most cases, events described as oral tradition are not very efficient in the reconstruction of time sequence. The historian collecting oral tradition must realize he is doing humane work but must detach himself from the history of the people and be objective and careful not to stoke conflict amongst the people or revive old wounds when reconstructing the past. He should reconstruct for the development, peace, and progress of society only then can the collection and usage of oral tradition play a role in national development. Oral tradition will offer leads to the archaeologists in culture and sites for possible excavation.

Archaeologists study man and his ancestors utilizing the material remain which has survived to date. It has three basic aims: to reconstruct the cultural history of extinct people, to explicate processes of culture change, validate oral history Derefaka, (1997). For archeological scientists, oral tradition is of a different value because of the method of investigation used in obtaining information. While a historian, linguist, or literalist will collect and start analyzing oral traditions, an archaeologist sees oral traditions as a working hypothesis, speculative and learned guesses.

The archaeologist is very skeptical of non-archeological evidence as they feel those pieces of evidence rarely resolve contentiously controversial issues though he does not have to deal with challenges of subjectivity, and ethnocentrism, which the oral historian has to contend with as measurement has overtaken subjectivity. Archeology often adopts the eclectic approach by relying on models from the historical and social sciences to interpret human finds. Thus specialist evidence is provided and corroborated by pedologists, ethnographers, paleontologists, geomorphologists, metallurgists, geologists, and potters.

The relationship between archaeology and oral traditions is evinced properly when one takes a look at reconnaissance/site location and oral tradition, actual excavation and oral tradition, laboratory analysis and oral tradition, and results from the interpretation and oral tradition. Archaeological reconnaissance of sites or locations is known basically by oral traditional leads, sometimes by accidents, visual observation of soil texture and color, electro magnetometer, differentials in vegetation, and others.

While historian visit communities to investigate the history of what and how the people had lived, an archaeologist asks in terms of abandoned habitation, burial sites, ritual sites, garbage dump theatres, and other such sites where artifacts can be found for reconstruction. *Igbo-Ukwu* was thrown to light when a cistern was dug from an Acheulian site in Uguele was literarily discovered



by a bulldozer of a quarry construction company and caterpillars of a road construction company found the Ogbodu-Aba site in Isi-Uzo local government in Enugu. When the archaeologist gets his artifacts like human and animal bones, pottery, shells of seafood, stones, knives, and others, he analyses to get the date and era they were used through Radio Carbon-14 Dating, to obtain near accurate chronology better than oral tradition which has the shortcoming of human memory and distortion.

Sometimes sites suggested to archaeologists through oral traditions yield nothing only for other sites to prove oral tradition wrong. Archaeological artifacts are not subject to propaganda, human enthusiasm, distortions, and patriotic feeling like oral traditions. These are all weaknesses of oral tradition giving archaeologists leads to potential sites. Thus archaeologist help authenticates oral history. Both disciplines complement each other as sites like Nwanker, Etiti-Ulu Bende, Umundu Nsukka, and Umukete-Aguleri have yielded positive findings to archaeologists through leads from oral tradition. Leading to results in excavation.

With direction from oral tradition, the archaeologist gets himself well prepared for the journey of excavation, especially in terms of getting the requisite equipment and tools to facilitate his job. If lead is given for a burial site or rock shelter, the archaeologist will prepare accordingly by taking with him what will ease his findings, preservation, analysis, and report. The archaeologist has to materially and mentally prepare for surprises, shocks, and challenges as he excavates.

Excavation is the principal tool of the archaeologist. After excavation proper, comes laboratory testing. Report from oral tradition will inform the archaeologists the type of tools to expect and having found his artifact resulting from excavation, he cleans them up and takes them to a testing laboratory to ascertain the age or chronology of the artifacts through Radio Carbon dating. Having a good knowledge of oral tradition will greatly help the archeologist to arrive at fairly

accurate dates valid in archeological history. Once the laboratory testing has been done the results have to be interpreted. From the artifacts, the archeologist will begin to infer from finds to make sense to know why both organic and inorganic resources were made, what a particular tool or site was used for and why of what importance, and how it has undergone changes over time. Archaeological remains are studied by their geometry (shape), physics (weight and magnetic properties), chemistry (chemical composition, trace element), biology (anthological, flora, and fauna), mineralogy, petrology, and others. The point of interpretation is very vital and often may lead to controversy on the part of his fellow archeologists hence he has to be very sure, definite, and objective in his interpretations, report, and preservation for others to access, read, understand and research further. It is glaring, from the above that oral tradition and archaeology are vital in the reconstruction of the past as they complement each other.

Problems and Prospects of Oral Tradition and Archaeology in Reconstruction

The main factors that have made it increasingly difficult for African society to hold and retain oral traditional knowledge over long periods have been attributed to the extended duration of the slave trade, European colonialism in different parts of the continent with different consequences like the case of white settlers in Southern Africa wars causing violent and forceful movements, destruction of organized communities, displacements, and instability overwhelming the mental capacity to hold the memory of oral tradition. Archaeological sites are forgotten and for some communities, the owners never returned to them after conflicts to identify sites for historical reconstruction.

Generally, oral tradition and archaeology are both history and invaluable sources of history. A lot of problems bisect both the collection of oral tradition and archaeological research in Nigeria. For archaeology, the terrain is often an issue, especially in water-logged areas (creeks, rivers swamps) like the Niger Delta and some mountainous regions like the Jos plateau. The cost



implications are always very high in terms of maintaining staff on-site, transport of equipment, excessive stress locating the site on foot over long distances, and climbing slopes to access the site; all these are really hard work and a challenge. For oral tradition, some communities are still attached to traditional beliefs not to tell their histories to academic historians (outsiders), or show sites that are shrines, grooves, and burial sites used by their ancestors. These hamper the efforts of historians to do their work and write the histories of communities. Lack of cultural awareness and failure of academic archaeologists to blend and share knowledge with amateur archaeologists create a gap in research and site identification. The problem of honorarium for local historians and community heads is also an issue as it is often very expensive. These lacunae must be bridged for archaeological results to be all inclusively fruitful.

To collect oral tradition the historian must know the structure of the community to locate centers of knowledge and repositories after a systematic recording of persons, specialists, and groups to obtain detailed records and variants of oral accounts including, poetry, folklore, proverbs, songs, and others. The age, names, and relevant biography of the informants must be taken. Such data remain paramount in accessing the authenticity of particular texts. Oral traditional texts recorded must be reproduced as original as they were collected free from distortions. Note-taking and high-quality recorders could be played back to obtain good repetition of words and expressions. Sometimes the informants hate to be recorded on tapes, especially in land disputes and chieftaincy disputed communities.

Another challenge is the limited or complete absence of technical equipment and facilities within Nigeria which hinder fieldwork, analysis, and publication of research results. A case in point is the lack of radiocarbon dating equipment and laboratories for testing and dating artifacts in Nigeria. Nigeria lacks a proper repository where data from field works can be properly stored, preserved, restored, and exhibited for people to access, study and appreciate the cultures and

history of ethnic groups in the country. The high cost of publishing oral traditions and archaeological research sometimes cannot be borne by the scholars and financial aid is often scarce to assist in this type of academic endeavor. This discourages scholars who cannot afford the cost. Most of the journals where results from oral traditions and archeological findings and reports are published are foreign-based which makes it difficult for Nigerians and local historians to access, read and carry out further research. Thus these research reports should be put in local archaeological report guides (sourcebook) in small volumes in abridged form for further research.

Irrespective of these challenges, the prospect of collecting, analyzing, publishing, and exhibiting results of research on archeology and oral tradition remains very promising. Government should come in and sponsor these researches to educate the people to know their history. The government can acquire equipment, set up testing laboratories, and set up institutes for archaeological and oral traditional research with the mandate of collecting the history of all communities in the country. The results will help foster inter-group relations in the country. Private academic investors, multi-national companies, and other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the United Nations Organization (UNO) should be interested and assist in researching the history of the communities they live and operate in as part of their social corporate responsibility. Society will be better off.

Conclusion

This paper examined the importance of archaeology and oral tradition as undisputable sources of historical reconstruction as any meaningful research on African historiography must start with these two complementary sources. A lot still has to be done in the collection of oral history and archaeological excavation from communities in Nigeria. This will help to effectively tell the true story of the African past to show areas of intergroup relations and peaceful coexistence making for unity and tolerance. Both archaeology and oral tradition face the problem of



difficulty in the collection, interpretation, documentation, preservation and publication, and further research for future generations. The most problematic issue is they both do not effectively periodize Africa's past before the fifteenth century based on African timelines. Prospectively, these challenges must be surmounted by intensifying archaeological and oral traditional research, probing the remote areas of African societies to recover the hidden past for more communities to be able to write their history, and knowing how communities are related to other communities or ethnic groups for mutual co-existence. Government must also come in to assist the historians financially through the provision of equipment for research in their effort to uncover the past of communities. The historian must be wise to use archaeology, oral tradition, and personal observations and make his evaluations and deductions from the total evidence before him before he commits to writing an authentic account of his historical reconstruction.

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