

Oral Tradition as a Reliable Source of Historical Writing: Arguments for and Against and Implications for Historical Writing in Education

MURAINA, Monsuru Babatunde

Department of Educational Foundations, Guidance and Counselling, University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

Abstract

Oral tradition is a reliable source of historical writing. This paper therefore examined oral tradition as a reliable source of historical writing: arguments for and against and implications for historical writing in education. To do this, efforts were made to define the concept of oral tradition, arguments for the use of oral tradition as a reliable source of historical writing, arguments against and implications for historical writing in education. It was therefore concluded that oral tradition can be used in historical writing in education. However, the historian must be cautious of some factors, such as the need to be patient to go to the root of the oral tradition in order to ensure that the facts collected and gathered are authentic and genuine.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, History, Historical writing, historian of education, implications

Introduction

As recently as fifty years ago, some western historians considered African historiography nothing better than ethno history or folk history, worthy of the attention of anthropologists, but not of professional historians, due to an assumption that the African continent still lay in a prehistoric period lacking writing systems, civilization, or a proper sense of history. Such historians mistook the predominance of oral cultures and traditions and the close relationship of African historical sources to folklore to mean a lack of historical consciousness. Indeed, African historical sources are predominantly oral traditions, reported through time as part of the knowledge, literature, language, and cultural resources of communities. Yet other sources are contemporary traditions remembered as part of the personal experiences of people living within a generation. Professional historians classify this second category of oral sources as oral history. These oral sources represent the baseline, internally derived data that carry the ideology, philosophy, history, and worldview of communities. Through the multidisciplinary method, historians are able to apply the insights of history, historical linguistics, archeology, and the resources of other disciplines to enrich the evidence of oral traditions, oral history, and folklore. Oral tradition has been a universal form of historical consciousness, which usually operated alongside writing. This was, indeed, the case in ancient Egypt, and in ancient Greece, a secondary center of innovation in the development of writing. When Herodotus visited Egypt (c. 454 BCE), he collected oral traditions from the priests, who were also the custodians of the archives. The Greek father of the western historiographical tradition was himself a practitioner of oral tradition and oral history. Historians of Africa use historical footprints wherever they can find them, and in whatever form: oral traditions, oral history, folklore, ethnography, the linguistic record, archaeological artifacts, and other sources of evidence. This paper therefore reacts to the saying of Robert Lowie that "I cannot attach to oral tradition, any historical value whatsoever under any condition". To do this, efforts were made to examine the meaning of oral tradition, oral tradition as a reliable source of historical writing, advantages of oral tradition, factors to be considered when using oral tradition in historical writing and problems or disadvantages of oral tradition. At last conclusion was drawn.

Meaning of Oral Tradition

Oral tradition is a story, tradition or practice that is shared orally or through speech- usually handed down from generation to generation. Oral tradition is usually eventually written down, but can tell us so much about the society and the people who originated them and allowed history to be kept and shared by groups who do or did not have writing. It was a good way to keep valuable information for others in your group and would allow the literate and the illiterate alike to share the information (<http://www.wikipedia.org> retrieved on Thursday, 12th May, 2011). In his own submission, Fadeyiye (2004) described oral tradition to include myths and legends which throw light on origin of communities- their social, economic and political institutions, their taboo, totems, social concepts and practices.

Is Oral Tradition a reliable source of historical writing?

Many commentators and professional historians particularly foreign ones such as Wilhem Frederick Hegel, Robert Lowie, Hugh Trevor Roper and vast African Historians trained in Europe vehemently expressed that oral sources of history is unreliable. This perhaps is due to the misconception of these historians to equate

documentary materials with history and absence of these definitely means no history. Even though oral tradition has its own weaknesses or shortcomings like lack of exact chronologies and dates among others, it can still be argued seriously that they are not sufficient and genuine enough to negate its reliability as a source of historical writing. No wonder, Ajayi and Alagoa (1990) submitted that “ such limitations(noticeable in oral tradition) when they are recognized explicitly by the historians who must work with them, do not necessarily invalidate African historiography as a scientific discipline; in fact recognition of the limitations strengthens its claims to be scientific while it stimulates the rigorous search for other means of achieving reliability”. Thus, oral tradition remains a reliable source of historical writing. It should be noted that in most part of Africa, learning consists of oral tradition and other oral sources. Commenting on the reliability of oral tradition, Vansina (1965) writes thus: “with all practitioners in the field, we can re-affirm that oral traditions are legitimate and valuable sources for the historians- sources which admittedly are usually difficult to handle, but which can yield information about past events and past trends. They are indispensable if we hope to arrive at a genuine understanding of what happened in Africa”. Thus in order to make oral tradition reliable as a valuable source of historical writing like other sources, the historians using this source must be meticulous, painstaking and cautious. Hence, the historians using oral tradition must possess an intimate knowledge and a clear understanding of the local languages, traditions and customs of the place and people whose oral traditions they are collecting for the reconstruction of their history.

Advantages of Oral Tradition

With particular reference to the continent of Africa where the art of writing is extremely limited before the advent of Europeans, oral tradition and other oral sources of history like oral evidence and others constitute the bulk of the sources where the past history of Africa could be reconstructed. Oral tradition is therefore a reliable source because African non-literate societies have always from time immemorial used the oral mode, of which oral tradition is an integral part for the transmission of their history-customs, traditions, folklores etc from one generation to another. Thus, oral traditions are very valuable in stimulating and promoting African cultural heritage. The genres of oral literature serve many functions in African society. Apart from providing amusement, these forms are used to educate the youth, to authenticate and validate ritual and belief, to promote and encourage conformity to cultural norms, and to provide psychological release in an institutionalized manner. Myths are regarded as an authority on questions of supernatural belief and ritual practice and are called on to justify land ownership, social stand or position, and political authority. Proverbs are used in ordinary conversation to guide, encourage, praise; admonish or teach, and to rebuke or reprove. They may be cited in court or in a King’s palace as precedents in developing a case or used as rhetorical devices to sway the judge’s assessment. Drama and dancing groups among the Tiv-speaking people of Nigeria use satirical play acted by humans and puppets to bring and bear social control on persons and groups failing to conform to cultural precepts.

Oral Tradition facilitates a better understanding of history. Oral tradition is a source of historical material. In writing history, there are various sources of materials available at the disposal of the Historian. The utmost concern of Historians is the possibility of gaining the knowledge of events and actions that happened in the past, which are no longer available for scrutiny or direct study. Since the persons or events in which they are interested are gone, historians have to rely for information on any evidence from the past concerning these past events or persons. Anything, material or immaterial that bears witness to the past is a historical document or source. Oral tradition as a good source of historical writing has in the recent times been given a prime of place in historical scholarship, particularly in Africa. A belief in the continuity of life, a life after death, and a community of interest between the living, the dead and the generation yet unborn is fundamental to all African religious, social and potential life. Thus, a sense of history and tradition has always been part of the African way of life. Each community, family, clan, village, town or states have its established tradition concerning its origins.

Oral tradition constitutes an integrative cultural institution among most peoples. It is a communal activity, which informs, as well as embodies the precepts and values that are permanent including those that are changing in that society. It contains the society’s wisdom and achievements in art, politics, religion, health care and so on. Oral tradition, in essence, almost always tends to capture cultural reality. Oral tradition covers a wider range of subject matter and can be found in a variety of forms. The form of oral tradition is determined more by its functional character than its oral nature. This form varies widely from people to people. There are similarities in the forms between different societies, but also unique features in the forms to be found in each society. Oral tradition is different from personal knowledge that is an aggregate of the community’s cultures handed down from one generation to another. Before any information is passed for a tradition, it must have been preserved and passed down by a much older generation to another. The information must of course, be orally transmitted.

Oral traditions do not only express emotion and arouse it in the listener, but also pass across knowledge, record and represent the various aspects of African cultural life such as values, custom, attitudes, history, social

institutions and arts. The bulk of oral traditions comprise folktales which could be grouped into stories of divination, hunters, experience, tales of women, either about love, intrigue or betrayal, expiatory and moralizing tale such as legends or fables.

Oral traditions could also be ideological and may be for the maintenance of status of dynasties, classes, cults or associations such as praise – appellations, praise-poems (Yoruba Oriki) ritual utterances, epic and myths of various types. Epic is a class of traditions all on its own. It is a narrative couched in poetic language, subject to special linguistic rules of focus. It is instructive about the lives of heroes and entertaining by their dramatic qualities. The African epic possesses all the features of classical epic, which are indispensable historical foundations with the derivations due to the embellishments of the facts, desire to please the prince and exaggeration of the strength of the heroes in question. Tales as a type of tradition are fiction and cannot be original. Tales, often do not have a beginning, a composition and an end, but rather disappeared into later tales. Though useful for the historian they contain materials of very mixed age and parentage. Myth is another aspect of orally transmitted tradition among Africans. Myths mean sacred narratives telling. The fact that myths are real to the average African cannot be overemphasized.

Many authorities on Mythology hence stressed the reality, as distinct from the fantastic or unreal aspects of myth. Myth is not merely a story that is told but a reality lived. Myth is not an idle tale rendered, but a hard worked active force behind a generation who had lived in the past. Myths, as tradition of the people, are not invented they are experienced. The triune and important attributes of myths are that they are cultural, psychological and spiritual. One aspect of oral tradition which is not being lost, as many are, and which is thriving till today is the proverbs. Since proverbs are the repository of the collective wisdom of the tribe, tribal etiquette dictates that the older members of the society, who amassed wisdom with their ages, is the rightful users. Proverbs are refreshingly efficient in placing contemporary incidents within the continuum of tribal tradition. *Oriki* or praise name which is prominent among the Yoruba is another aspect of oral tradition. It is an ever-growing and blossoming source of historical data.

It is imperative to stress here that oral traditions are veritable tools in historical reconstruction. Many professional and non-professional historians have judiciously used oral sources in writing history. Alagoa(1966) used a considerable portion of oral tradition to write copiously on the involvement of the Ijo's of the Niger Delta. This he did with a combination of other useful historical source materials such as artifacts and some other written evidence. The work of Samuel Johnson *The History of the Yorubas* was written mainly if not entirely using oral tradition which he collected by himself during his various postings as a minister of religion in Ibadan and Oyo and as a peace negotiator in the Yoruba wars of the 1880s. That the Benin conquered Lagos and established a dynasty there probably in the 6th century must have been revealed through a tradition passed down through generations. This information is available to the historian to better understand some of the chieftaincy similarities (both in forms and in nomenclature) between Benin and Lagos. Also, as quoted by Alo (2006), Mabogunje and Omer-cooper(1971) made a considerable use of oral traditions in writing the *history of Owu*. They believe that oral tradition has the function in any society of supporting the political structure and the social and cultural moves of the group.

Problems or shortcomings of oral tradition as a source material for historical writing

In spite of the importance and contributions of oral traditions as source materials for historical writing coupled with the fact that there is no historical source that does not have its weaknesses, there are many problems levied against Oral tradition. Some of these problems are succinctly discussed below:

The refusal of many foreign and western trained historians to recognize oral traditions or oral historical accounts as really true historical artifacts serves as one the problems. Their refusal is partly due to a number of factors ranging from racial superiority to failure to appreciate African culture and historical growth.

Besides, oral tradition has been regarded as being liable to distortions. Also, many of the narrators may like to avoid unpleasant facts. Oral traditions could be used to justify situations or claims in the present. This has often led to distortions and fabrications.

Another noticeable problem is that of chronology. While written sources may be precise in dates, oral traditions provide no absolute dates. In oral traditions, events are usually dated only to the reigns of chiefs, the outbreak of epidemics or diseases, wars, famine and others.

Oral traditions are susceptible to changes to different social attitudes. Such changes occur in keeping with the climate of opinion that prevails at the time and may also be due to personal ambition or to achieve political ends.

Oral traditions as a reliable source of historical writing: Implications for historical writing in education

In spite of the unjustifiable allegations or arguments levied against the use of oral tradition in historical writing, it is important that the historians of education using oral traditions bear in mind the following factors:

The historian must know the shortcomings noticeable in oral tradition vis-à-vis education. It is in this

regard that he or she will be able to avoid as much as possible such shortcomings while using oral tradition. The historian of education must understand the fact that precise dates are rare in oral tradition and that oral tradition can be distorted or fabricated to give credence to a religion or distorted for political reasons in order to glorify a set of people, clan or family. He or she must understand that transmission of oral tradition from one generation to another orally makes it vulnerable to inaccuracies. Thus, historian of education using oral tradition must be able to distinguish clearly which of the oral traditions are reliable and which ones are not?. The above corroborates with the postulation of Stevens (1978) that: “ it becomes the job of the historians to discover which elements in oral tradition are reliable as sources of data, which are unreliable, and which can provide clues to the locations of reliable sources elsewhere, and this task can be so frustrating as to cause the researcher to reject oral sources altogether”.

Similarly, historian of education must be patient enough and must be painstaking when dealing with oral traditions. By this, he or she will be able to get to the root of the oral traditions so that his findings or results or conclusions will be authentic and worthwhile. The historian of education through patience will be able to ascertain which oral traditions are genuine and which ones are deliberately invented to validate the claim of individuals or groups so as to promote their status or gain social recognition in the society and their educational impact.

Another important factor to be considered by the historian of education using oral traditions is that he or she should use other methods alongside with the oral sources. This is where the interdisciplinary approach is relevant. Hence, the historian of education can also use the anthropological, ethnographical, archeological or descriptive or survey methods. Perhaps, it is in this regard that Stevens (1978) comment that: “ He (historian) must use oral traditions as guides for comparative research. Elements in traditions must be cross-checked with other traditions, with anthropological studies, with archeological data, with the results of linguistic methods such as glotto-chronology and with written records. It is not an easy job (using oral traditions as a historical source). But with patience and care and the ability to transcend his own cultural and educational biases, the historian in Africa can make good use of oral traditions”.

Conclusion

So far so good, this paper has established the fact there has been a considerable opposition to the use of oral tradition in historical writing, mostly by many European writers and non-European writers who were trained in Europe. However, it has been noted that such opposition is unjustified because there is no historical source either oral or written that is fool-proof, that is having no shortcomings or weaknesses. Nevertheless, the use of oral traditions and other non-written sources like oral history-oral evidence, archeological remains and a host of others have come to stay as reliable sources for the writing of history or for the recovery of the past history. Also, the fact that eminent historians like Alagoa, E.J, Ade Ajayi, Dike, O.K; Obaro Ikime and others used oral sources or non-written sources to reconstruct African history proofs that oral traditions are good source materials for historical writing. However, the reliability of oral tradition can be better guaranteed through the interdisciplinary approach. The conclusion arrived at through the oral sources could be cross-checked through other available sources like written sources such as anthropology, ethnography, linguistics, geography, sciences and archeology.

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