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## THE USE OF ORAL SOURCE OF INFORMATION FOR HISTORICAL CONSTRUCTION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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### **Abstract**

*This paper investigates some of the factors that inhibit the use of oral source as a veritable source of information. Questionnaires were administered to selected professionals who use oral sources of information. Eight barriers to the use of oral tradition were identified by respondents. These include: political propaganda, which ranked highest. Other inhibitors include, chronological distortion, telescoping, lengthening, distortion of Kinglist, forgetfulness due to insufficient record, deliberate exaggeration and when the master edition is not the published one. The study also identifies some values of oral narratives which include: definition of corporate existence of a community, commemoration and celebration of major events, validation of claims to property-land title, documentation of internal land external migration. The paper notes that there is no source of information whether written or oral that does not have its shortcomings and concludes that oral tradition, despite its weaknesses has proved to be one of the best sources of information for historical reconstruction. The study recommended the use of other source of information as a checklist to the abuses in the use of oral traditions. This includes the use of several visions ethnograph, written, archive archaeological and linguistic source and multidisciplinary approach.*

### **Introduction**

From the very beginning of mankind, to the Garden of Eden, the drama between Adam, Eve, the serpent and God was entirely oral, (Greaves, 1991). Reading and writing were then in the distance future, and so it was for many centuries. During a man's lifetime he would pass on his knowledge to another person, who might remember it. Thus for thousands of years basic skills in agriculture, medicine and other necessary arts remained at a primitive level

because there was no means to store the relevant information except in the human memory, which might not have been completely reliable.

In this paper, the words oral traditions, oral sources, oral narrators and oral data will be used interchangeably. Vansina (1965) defines oral tradition as testimonies of the past, which are deliberately transmitted from mouth to mouth. For Ryder, (1975) oral traditions is the forms in which man related by words of mouth, the past of himself, his ancestors, his rulers or his people. For him oral tradition is a sort of command activity, which tells the precepts, value permanent and changed aspects of the society. It consists of the wisdom and achievement in arts, science, technology, health, law, politics and history. It covers the whole aspect of the life of the people in the society.

This paper seeks to examine the reliability of information emanating from these sources and identify those problems that inhibit its use by the professionals who use them and how those problems can be rectified.

### Statement of the Problem

African society has been described as an oral society. This is informed by the fact that writing was not known in an African society. The traditional modes of information dissemination were basically oral. The efficacy of oral narrative has been demonstrated by Ugboajah (1986), who described these traditional modes of information as **ORAMEDIA** emphasizing their most visible attribute – orality – oral narratives as sources of information, from the bases for the existence of the African society.

In view of the fact that these sources of information still exist in African societies, which are more rural bound than developed societies. Since these sources are oral and human being by nature can be forgetful, to what extent can professionals who use these sources rely on them for the reconstruction of their societies. Specially what are those problems that inhibit the use of those oral narratives and to what extent can they be relied upon for proper functioning of the societies in which they exist. This is the central focus of this research as it addresses the case of indigenous Igbo societies of Nigeria.

### Objectives of the Study

The basic objective of this study is to identify those factors that inhibit the use of oral narrative as a source of information. It is also to identify values and prospects of oral information for historical reconstruction.

### Literature

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### Method

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## Literature Review

The most common way of communication among the Africans is by word of mouth or the spoken word, sometimes in a face situation. The speaker formulates his messages and transmits it orally by word of mouth to his audience (Chiezey, 1982). The traditional mode of communication is a function of an indigenous system of communication of the people, which helps them to narrate their past.

The efficacy of traditional mode of communication has been demonstrated by Ughoajah who called these traditional modes "Oramedia" emphasising their most visible attribute; orality (Ugboajah, 1986).

Earlier studies on the problems of oral narratives have shown that oral tradition can serve many important functions for the survival and up-keep of society. Idowu (1973) has maintained that oral tradition is very useful for the Africans and those interested in the reconstruction of the past. He listed some of the values of oral tradition, these include the use of oral tradition for corporate identity of the community, safe guard the society from unfavourable accounts, rationalize accepted views of the community, commemorate and celebrate major events, validate claims to land title and property, determine sexual relationship, historical reconstruction etc. A study by Armstrong (1969) confirmed the above values of local tradition and concluded that one of the fundamental sources for the history of Africa is certainly the oral tradition of the people.

A critical review of literature on oral tradition also indicate that while there are factors that justify the use of oral tradition for historical reconstruction's, there are others that deter one from the use of such sources of history.

Henize (1971), Forte (1970) Plumb (1969) in their studies have identified factors such as chronological distortion of Kinglist, political propaganda, telescoping, lengthening, forgetfulness due to insufficient record, deliberate exaggeration as some of the factors that inhibit the use of oral narratives of historical reconstruction.

## Methodology

This research aims at assisting researchers, historians, political scientists, politicians, anthropologists, archeologists, traditional rulers, archivists, librarians, information scientists who may be interest in the use of oral data for historical reconstruction to appreciate the values problems that militate against such venture.

This study was visualized as a fact finding project surely of the problems and values associated with oral sources. The principal method adopted was the questionnaire method. In order to obtain data for the study effort was made to design a closed and partially open questionnaire. This was to allow for free expression as well as for controlled answers.

The study was carried out on selected professionals whose professions are relevant for the custodian of oral data and who in the course of their work use these sources.

One hundred and ten copies of the questionnaires design for this study were distributed to a stratified sample of professionals relevant for this study.

The respondents were asked to close from a list containing 8 possible deterrents to the use of oral data in historical writing.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by profession

<u>Professionals</u>	<u>Respondents</u>	<u>% of Total</u>
Historical	10	11%
Anthropologist	8	8.8%
Archaeologists	7	7.7%
Librarian	10	11%
Researchers	9	9.9%
Information Scientists	8	8.8%
Political Scientists	6	6.6%
Politicians	10	11%
Traditional Rulers	8	8.8%
Lawyers	10	11%
Archivists	6	6.6%
	94	88.5%

The various categories of oral sources used by the respondents in their works include, folktales, myths, family and local tradition, genealogy, songs, poetry, praise songs, etc.

The problems that respondents usually encounter in the process of using oral tradition are presented in Table 2. They include chronological distortion, distortion of Kinglist, political propaganda, telescoping, lengthening, forgetfulness due to insufficient records, deliberate exaggeration and when the master edition is not the published one.

Political propaganda was ranked highest by respondents, with 90 (95.4%) considering this is the major deterrent in the use of oral narrative for

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historical writing. They argue that oral traditions are nothing more than formulations of the contemporary schemes of political and ceremonial relationships. Closely following respondents (74.2) indicated encountering this problem while 55 (58.0%) the respondents saw the problem of chronological distortion as a major deterrents as far as the use of oral data is concerned. The distortion of Kinglist came fourth as respondents 50 (53.0%) identified it as an inhibitor "telescoping" was ranked fifth 35 (38.0%) by respondents as a major deterrents to the use of oral tradition in their jobs. The problem of forgetfulness due to insufficient records came sixth in the ranking with 30 (31.8%) of the respondent. The problem which was ranked seventh on the list is a situation when master edition is not the published one, 25 respondents (27.5%) indicated this problem as a major deterrents to the use of oral tradition for historical writing. Coming on the bottom of list is the problem of lengthening which ranked eight was indicated by 10 (10.5%) respondents.

**Table 2: A ranking of deterrents identified by all respondents**

Deterrents	Frequency	Percentage of Respondent
Political Propaganda	90	95.4
Deliberate Exaggeration	70	74.2
Chronological Distortion	55	58.0
<i>Distortion of Kinglist</i>	50	53.0
Telescoping	35	38.0
Forgetfulness due to insufficient Record	30	31.8
<u>When the master edition is not The published one</u>	25	27.5
Lengthening	10	10.5

Despite the above identified problems which may tend to discourage users of oral sources of information for historical reconstruction, there are great value which characterise oral sources of oral narrative have made the sources inevitable in historical reconstruction. The values of oral narratives as veritable sources of information include:

Firstly, oral tradition is very useful for African and those interested in the reconstruction of the past. All communities in Africa have their own traditions of origin, which are used to define the corporate identity of the community. This oral tradition giving the same origin is intended or used the

people a sense of brotherhood and a sense of belongings. The information here tells you who your uncle, brother, sister, grandfather etc. are and your position in the community. With this, you feel a sense of belonging.

Secondly, oral tradition is also used to safe-guard the security of the society. The people ensure that areas in the tradition that are unfavourable aspect of the past is edited or suppressed. This is done because it is believed that it is the favourable happy account of the past that is salutary for the good of the society tragic accounts of the past can bring ill fortune to the present society.

Also in the same vein, oral information is used to rationalise the accepted views of the past of a particular community. For instance, it is convenient for the Yorubas to argue that Yorubas land is cradle of civilization and that infact the world started in Ile-Ife. The oral tradition about Ile-Ife is reinforced by the "garden of Eden" that is situated in the Oni's palace.

African also use oral information to commemorate and celebrate major events, in the past history or in the present life of the community. Most of the festivals in Africa are functions of oral tradition. The celebrations of festivals like new Yam festival in Okuku. The Eleregbe festival in Ijebu area. All these festivals and their celebrations are arrived at the various oral traditions of the communities.

Africans use oral traditions to validate to property, land and title. It is with this tradition that claims and arguments are backed up with evidence showing their right to these claims. A person whose great grand father held a particular title, does not need a written document to lay claim to that title. The same thing applies to land and land use system.

Historians and Archaeologist use oral tradition for historical reconstruction. Where oral information is systematically collated, it can be used in reconstructing political, economic and social activities including the religion of Africans at different stages of their development and where oral tradition has been used with other disciplines e.g. archaeology and linguistics, a detailed information about past of African society have been known.

Oral evidence in Africa is also used to determine sexual relationship. African community lives in hamlet and small settlements mostly, yet they know those they can relate with and the extent of the relation. Oral information helps to define those you can marry and those you cannot marry. Every community without the use of written documents the families or clans it cannot marry from. It is strongly believed by the use of oral source also that those who flout arrangement in sexual relationship suffer one form of misfortune or the other until they appease the gods of the land.

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Apart from sexual relationship, oral sources help the people to appreciate their beginning and reverend it. This is in form of the genealogy of the people in a royal family; this can provide a list of king that has ascended to throne before. The implication of this is that it gives justification and judicial proof of the legitimacy of the ruling thing and exposes usurpers. It will prevent those not in line from becoming Kings.

Oral evidence is also use to teach moral and offers opportunity for socialization for instance in folktales, apart from the immense enjoyment children derive from the stories, they also get to know unconsciously about what the community considers good or bad behaviour, the taboos and sanctions against them and the general belief system of the community. For instance only a child who has listened to the tortoise tales comes to appreciate that the type of behaviour invariably attributed to this animal is not approved of in the community, this is in addition to the socialization, fun and humour in the telling of the story.

Oral traditions have also documented migrations both internal and external. Through oral tradition we now know areas of migration and pattern of migration. With oral information people are able to know those who are actually sons of the soil and those who settle down from other tradition, insist that the Modakekes settled in their present location in Ife from another areas. This is very common in many communities in Africa.

### **Conclusion**

Most of the deterrents to the use of orals source as a veritable source of information are essentially political which bother on an effort by the people or the power that be to present themselves or their community in good light by rationalizing accepted views of the past of a particular community. The above is informed by the belief that it is the favourable happy account of the past that is salutary for the good of the society; tragic account of the past can bring ill fortune to the present society. With this mind, areas in the tradition that are unfavourable aspects of the past are edited or suppressed.

The above explained why political propaganda stands out as the worst deterrent with 90 (95.4%) of all respondents indicting such. This problem bothers on the ego integrity of the people and the community.

As it were, this position has no doubt misled the users of oral tradition like, the historians, the social scientists, the anthropologists, the librarians, the archaeologists, the information scientists, the archivists, the lawyers and all who use orals data.

In spite of the above identified problems associated with sources of oral narratives, the study also found out that there are values and prospects for oral information. These values include the use of oral information for the definition of corporate identity of the community, the rationalization of accepted view of a particular community. It is also used to commemorate and celebrate major events, validate claims to property, land and title, historical reconstruction and the determination of se relation. Also oral narratives help to teach morals and offers opportunity for socialization. It could also be used to document migrations both internal and external

Finally, this study realizes the fact that there is no source of information; whether written or oral that does not have its shortcoming. The truth of the matter is that oral tradition as a source of information, despite its weakness has proved to be one of the best sources of information for historical reconstruction.

However, to make oral tradition a veritable source of information, more meaningful and relevant to the users, it is pertinent to have a check list of other sources which will help in redressing the abuses, apparent in the use of oral sources of information. In order to achieve this, the use of ethnography written, achieve and archaeological sources could be emphasized. Also a multidisciplinary approach is necessary if we must treat oral sources of information with respect it deserve.

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