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A NOTE ON ORAL TRADITION AND HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

RUTH FINNEGAN

There are a number of assumptions about the nature of oral tradition in Africa which are sometimes made by historians and others. Two of these will be discussed in this Note — the assumption that “oral tradition” is something unitary and self-evident and that it is somehow impervious to many of the factors which historians usually take account of in critical assessment of sources. These (and other) assumptions about the nature of oral tradition are generally unconscious, but — perhaps because of that — they have often seriously affected its use as a source in African history. Of course not all historians make the assumptions discussed here, but they are common enough to warrant some general comment.

The common assumption that “oral tradition” is something uniform, something that can be treated as an undifferentiated and self-evident entity, leads to the tendency of some historians¹ and others to speak of “oral tradition” generally as a source, without apparently feeling the need — which would be obvious in the case of documentary sources — to describe and analyze the detailed source material. In practice a number of very disparate sources have often been lumped together under the name “oral tradition.” Broadly one can list three main classes of oral tradition: recognized literary forms, generalized historical knowledge, and personal recollections.

First there is what has been called “oral literature.” Though hard to define precisely, this class is composed of various types of both prose and poetry which correspond to literature in literate societies. Oral literature is relatively formalized, in the sense not of verbal accuracy but of genres clearly recognized in the society, and is sometimes — poetry especially — regarded as the product of specialist activity. A brief survey of the forms of oral literature follows.²

Praise poetry is one of the best known forms, occurring in most of the traditional centralized states of Africa. Since its main theme is eulogy (most often of the ruler) it is political propaganda, and we cannot expect any very direct historical information, in the sense of exact description or narration. Nevertheless, praise

1. Not some of the more rigorous analysts however, like J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition; A Study in Historical Methodology*, transl. H. Wright (London, 1965); P. D. Curtin, “Field Techniques for Collecting and Processing Oral Data,” *Journal of African History* 9 (1968), 367-385; E. J. Alagoa, “Oral Tradition Among the Ijo of the Niger Delta,” *Journal of African History* 7 (1966), 405-419; G. S. Were, *A History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya* (Nairobi, 1967).

2. The list makes no attempt to be comprehensive. Further types are discussed in Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, and R. Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Oxford, 1970).

poetry can lead to insight into the values and ideals of the society, or of one group at least. Religious poetry, particularly if by highly trained specialists, can be conservative and thus potentially a good source; for the history of earlier times the problem, of course, is to sort out not only which are the older poems but which parts of these preserve earlier references and which not — which is difficult to do without knowing a lot about the earlier history already. Lyrics — songs for weddings, dance, work, love, and so forth — can throw light on values and personal preoccupations in a society at a particular time, but of course tend to be ephemeral. Topical and political poems can be an excellent source *if* they are recorded at the time they spring up; essentially short-lived, they are seldom or never feasible sources for arguing back to an earlier period.³

All in all, poetry in non-literate as in literate societies can be illuminating for the historian — of direct relevance for the intellectual history of the time and indirectly useful for other aspects of society, provided the historian avoids literalistic interpretations and proceeds circumspectly, bearing in mind all the elements of propaganda, idealization, personal whim, exaggeration, artistry, and desire to please that variously characterize different kinds of poetry. In non-literate societies there is the additional and often overwhelming difficulty that unless a poem is recorded at the actual time being studied — which few have been — there is usually no way of knowing from a later poem whether it is the same as or even slightly similar to versions in the earlier period. Normally the safest assumption can only be that it is not.

It will have been noticed that I have said nothing about “historical poetry” or about “epic.” Surely these provide the best and most relevant source for the historian? The truth is that this type of poetry seems surprisingly uncommon in Africa. Certainly there are some exceptions, and there are of course a number of well-known instances of *written* historical poems under Arabic influence. But in general terms specifically “historical poetry” seems rare as an oral form, and even apparent instances turn out to be basically more like panegyric, the element of narration being subordinate to that of eulogy. True “epic,” in spite of widespread assumptions about its being the natural form in many non-literate societies, is hard to find.⁴

Prose literature can be discussed more briefly. It tends to less specialization than poetry in African oral literature. Unlike poets, the performer/composer of prose is seldom an expert, and often genres are not recognized. The outside analyst could list several main categories. First there are obviously fictional narratives concerned with people, imaginary beings, or animals. These clearly give little clue to the historian, though scholars still steeped in the idea that they date from the immemorial past purport to find traces of earlier ages and ideas in them. “Myths,” or narrations about creation, deities, and so on, do not occur in the wide-ranging sense in which they appear among, say, the Polynesians or American Indians, but have nevertheless been spoken of by a number of writers. These narratives are admitted to be of little direct historical relevance: they tend to reflect present realities and preoccupations rather than those of earlier periods.⁵ If recorded at

3. The Mau Mau political songs, for instance, were thus recorded and should prove extremely useful to the historian of this period.

4. For a further discussion of this problem, see Finnegan, *Oral Literature*, Note to chapter 4, 108-110.

5. For an instance of this see below on the “myth” about the founding of Gonja.

the time, however, they can be useful for a later historian by throwing light on local attitudes rather than as literal statements.

The narrations often termed "legends" or historical narratives again are unfortunately rather less promising as sources than they might seem at first mention. The common picture of formalized historical accounts being passed down from generation to generation by specialists whose duty it is to recite and transmit them accurately turns out to be not so widely applicable as one might expect; in fact it appears that the concept of historical narrative as a definite literary form distinct from other genres is relatively rare, except in societies much influenced by Arabic culture. This exception is of course not an unimportant one, as it affects many of the societies in the huge Sudan area across Africa and on the East African coast. Here historical accounts not infrequently took a written form and there was mutual interchange between oral and written versions.⁶ There are also perhaps some other exceptions in states where, like Dahomey, Kuba, or Rwanda, the king kept close control over a centralized and authoritative version of the history.

Even these exceptions, however, involve their own difficulties. Were they really handed down "word for word"? There is almost no way of checking this (for even if one earlier version coincides closely, this cannot prove that still earlier ones did too) the fact that unfortunately local people believe that accounts are given accurately is not necessarily evidence. Again, the fact that such accounts are often the versions authorized by those currently holding political and/or religious power and, furthermore, are often mingled with praise of the ruling house and its ancestors, means that one must treat them with caution as an historical source.⁷ In addition one has to be chary of taking such accounts literalistically. A narrative about first arrival in an area — a common topic — need not necessarily be interpreted as the migration of a whole people. Even if the account of actual arrival is accurate it may really only refer to one influential family coming to an already populated area. One good example of this is in Gabon oral tradition. If the traditions of specific "migrations" were taken literally "the history of Gabon would begin with an empty forest only 300 years ago, into which various peoples penetrated abruptly"; in fact it is clear from documentary and archaeological evidence that the area was inhabited long before this.⁸ Travels, conquests, and arrivals are in any case common themes in stories, even among long settled peoples, and one must always be cautious about accepting them literally as the record of either wholesale migrations or specific military engagements.⁹ Nevertheless, these professed historical narratives can be useful for the relatively recent periods when the description is usually less steeped in supernatural elements than the early portions of such accounts.

6. With the corollary that some of these written chronicles must be subject to the same cautious treatment as oral accounts.

7. A point well discussed in Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 155, but often neglected (see, for instance, M. Southwold's acceptance at their face value of claims in official Ganda king lists that those who succeeded to the kingship by rebellion were all in any case highly qualified to succeed [*History and Social Anthropology*, ed. I. M. Lewis (London, 1968), 130]).

8. H. Deschamps, "Traditions orales au Gabon" in *The Historian in Tropical Africa*, ed. J. Vansina (London, 1964), 175.

9. For a critique of the concept of migration as an explanatory device, see H. S. Lewis, "Ethnology and Culture History" in *Reconstructing African Culture History*, ed. C. Gabel and N. R. Bennett (Boston, Mass., 1967), 32-33 and references given there.

However — to return to the main point — there seem in fact to be relatively few specifically historical formal narratives in Africa. Some of the apparent exceptions rest on a misunderstanding. Many of the texts presented as “local historical accounts” are in fact elicited rather than spontaneous narratives. In other words, an answer is being given to a particular researcher which would not be naturally given in other circumstances and therefore does not form part of the formal transmission of traditions in that society. An elicited narrative of this kind is of course particularly subject to current preoccupations and conflicts, the status of and attitude to the inquirer, the present political situation and so on. This is not to say that such narrations are useless. But they are clearly a different kind of account from one formally handed down and authorized by the society or a dominant group in it. Too often we are not told by the researcher which type of “historical narrative” he is relying on; we may thus be given the impression that what was in fact an elicited version is really an authoritative and formalized account.

So far we have been concentrating on the first broad category of oral tradition — recognized literary forms. The second category is rather different. This is the general historical knowledge in a particular society which is not normally crystallized into actual recitations.¹⁰ This knowledge may consist of beliefs about recent events or may include references to the more remote past. In each case such beliefs or references are less subject to formal requirements than the “oral literature” type, and are perhaps particularly subject to modification or embroidery in the light of current fashions, interests, events, or the availability of written accounts.

Informal historical knowledge includes not only general notions of what happened in the past, but also a few elements which, though not eligible for the term “oral literature,” can take a somewhat formalized shape. These include items like place names, praise names, or genealogies. Again, such sources have both uses and limitations.

Genealogies are a good case in point. There are a few instances in which genealogies are formally recited in, say, prayers or praises, but most often they merely form part of the general knowledge of a society or group. As such, they might seem an excellent source as far as they go. Some of their drawbacks, however, are well known.¹¹ There is the tendency to telescope, i.e., for links to fall out and be forgotten; there may be grafting on of extraneous links — as in Koranko genealogies going back to Noah and Adam, Fung pedigrees claiming descent from the Prophet,¹² or others from locally well-known but equally unrelated personages; or early ancestors may be rationalized in terms of current ideas or claims so that, say, early chieftlets or village heads are presented as equally Paramount Chiefs or kings with their descendants. All these points arise from the inherent changeability of oral forms.

Perhaps less well known are the dangers of the way apparently objective genealogies are in fact closely tied to current — and ephemeral — political or social

10. The “elicited narrations” just mentioned properly fit into this category.

11. See account in Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 153-154.

12. E. F. Sayers, “The Funeral of a Koranko Chief,” *Sierra Leone Studies* (o.s.) 7 (1925), 24; B. A. Ogot in *The Middle Age of African History*, ed. R. Oliver (London, 1967), 51.

realities. An example can illustrate this.¹³ The Tiv of Nigeria are a people who have traditionally had an uncentralized political system largely based on lineages and for whom, therefore, genealogies are of the utmost importance. They believe that they are all descended from one man (Tiv) through fourteen to seventeen generations of known ancestors. Yet these genealogies are constantly in dispute, and one even finds the same person citing different and contradictory genealogies on different occasions. These changes are dependent not on lapses of memory or on what Vansina would call "distortions," but arise merely because their actual use is always tied to some practical issue; there is never recitation or learning of genealogies as a whole for their own sake. Genealogies are thus used to fit particular facts, and are constantly being modified in the light of the current situation. One incident illustrates this very clearly. A certain law case involved a question of genealogies. The details do not concern us, but, roughly, the question of whether a certain man (*X*) received compensation or not turned on the exact position of one of his ancestors, Amena, possibly his great grandfather. But it was not agreed by the elders whether Amena was in fact one man, two men, or even perhaps a woman. It was first decided on a priori grounds that he was not a woman, but the issue still remained: if he was one man, then *X* was not due compensation; if two, then he was due it. In the event, he was not compensated, because none of the relevant property happened to be currently available. Two days later, however — and this is the point — the elders all agreed that Amena was only one person *on the grounds that* the compensation had not been paid. The genealogy was thus directly dependent on the result of the law case. This is a particularly striking example of the variability of genealogies, but many similar cases could be mentioned.¹⁴

Leaving the discussion of this flexible type of general historical knowledge, we come to the third broad category of oral tradition — personal recollections. In many ways these are the best sources of all. Of course there are still obvious safeguards to be observed — exactly the same kind as for similar recollections in literate societies. There is the need to cross-check and to allow for personal prejudices, romantic memories, special interests, lack of direct involvement, exaggeration, and so on. But clearly this kind of source is much nearer the primary facts than similar accounts which have been handed down through several generations.

In using oral tradition as an historical source, it is important to make clear in each instance under which of these three broad categories a particular item falls: formalized oral literature, informal historical knowledge, or personal recollections. The reason for this is an obvious one. Each type has its own particular dangers or limitations, and critical use of sources involves making these explicit —

13. This account is based on L. Bohannan, "A Genealogical Charter," *Africa* 22 (1952), 301-315.

14. For some further examples of changes in genealogies, see E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer* (Oxford, 1940), 199-200; *Tribes Without Rulers*, ed. J. Middleton and D. Tait (London, 1958), 10, 42 ff, 198 ff, 218; J. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion* (London, 1960), 8, 235-236, 265; J. van Velsen, *The Politics of Kinship* (Manchester, Eng., 1964), 268-269; and the references given in J. A. Barnes, "Genealogies" in *The Craft of Social Anthropology*, ed. A. L. Epstein (London, 1967), 118-121.

something which it is impossible to do without differentiating between the categories. The idea that "oral tradition" is something unitary and can be treated as such runs counter to all the normally accepted historical procedures of assessing each type of source on its own merits.

The notion that when using "oral tradition" one can suspend many of the normal critical canons of historical research is, despite the caution of more experienced historians, surprisingly prevalent.¹⁵ Perhaps this is because the various assumptions about oral tradition coming down word for word, about its unitary nature, or about its supposed freedom from individual originality or artistry seem to add up to the conclusion that oral tradition is somehow impervious to the kinds of factors of which historians are so aware with other sources — the effects of, say, prejudice or propaganda, personal interests or fantasies, aesthetic forms, or just the variations between different types of sources.

I would suggest that the opposite of this assumption is in fact true. Oral sources are in many ways even more open to such factors than written ones. A written document is certainly liable to many influences as it is written down, but once written it can be taken as permanent. Oral forms, on the other hand, are open to all these influences, not only on the occasion of the first formulation and delivery, but on every single occasion of delivery afterward. Because they *are* oral, and thus can exist only as and when they are rendered by word of mouth, obviously they are closely affected by a number of additional factors that do not apply to documentary sources.

First there is the whole aspect of performance. The oral speaker is by definition a performer, and all the arts of drama, rhetoric, display, and verbal facility may be relevant in his performance. Furthermore, since speakers vary in these arts, so too will the style, structure, even content of what he says. Unlike the author of a written document, the author of an oral historical account does not always remain the same; in the case of traditions handed down over long periods he is necessarily different; and different individuals have different ways of presenting the facts, different prejudices, different interpretations. Over any length of time at all this is likely to lead to many changes and in a very complicated way.

Oral forms are, secondly, deeply affected by the kinds of audiences to which they are addressed on any particular occasion. The audience is there, face to face, inescapable; it may be members of the family, friends, the king, children, a government official, a foreign researcher — and in each case the version may be different. Those whom local people rightly or wrongly associate with the government are particularly likely to have special versions given to them. In parts of Nigeria local people gather the evening before to prepare a version for delivery to the researcher the next day, and government officials frequently find that different accounts of history are being given by contending families or areas to bolster their own claims to some desired benefit. This is a consideration which makes one doubtful about the value of hasty recording of oral traditions. One example that springs to mind is Meyerowitz's research in Ghana; she visited over 130 towns and villages within nine months to record their traditions of origin — and this at a period when

15. See the warnings in, for example, Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, and Curtin, "Field Techniques."

European visitors were associated with the government and regarded with suspicion.¹⁶

Oral tradition is also more constantly subject to outside influences because of its close connection with the current social situation. Each performance is on a specific occasion, and each occasion is in turn subject to the whole changing social background. This means that there is constant interpretation and reinterpretation in terms of the current situation. One example of this is provided by the Tiv genealogies already mentioned. Another is the story of the founding of the kingdom of Gonja in northern Ghana. One version of this was recorded around 1900, a period at which Gonja was divided into seven administrative divisions. The story tells how the state was first founded by a certain Jakpa who came to the area in search of gold, conquered the local inhabitants and became king by right of conquest; his seven sons and their descendants became the seven divisional chiefs. About 1960 the "same" story was recorded again. By that date two of the old divisions had disappeared, leaving only five; and the tale speaks of only five sons, with no mention at all of the other two.¹⁷ A narrative like this is obviously influenced as much by present realities and power relationships as by historical considerations.¹⁸

The idea therefore that oral tradition is somehow impervious to all the kinds of influences of which historians must take cognizance in other sources is far from the truth. Oral tradition, being inherently variable and unfixed, is in certain ways peculiarly susceptible to such factors, and this is something of which an historian using these sources must take special account.

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16. E. Meyerowitz, *Akan Traditions of Origin* (London, 1952), 15, 17.

17. J. Goody and I. Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963), 310.

18. An aspect brought out by the common point in social anthropological writings that such accounts are "mythical charters" for the existing social and political situation.