

## The Position of Oral Tradition (Myths, Mythology and Legends) in Historical Records

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**Abstract.** History as a subject deals with the study of significant past events, this past events are only transmitted through the efforts of witnesses to the events. Every aspect of history must not be documented and this brings us to the main crux of this paper which has to do with the relevance of oral tradition in historical recording. Oral tradition in this paper covers Myths, Mythology and Legends. This paper tends to ask a vital question on who among these two issues came first, HISTORY OR THE HISTORIAN?

### 1. Introduction

Oral tradition as a term applies to a process of transmission of facts from one individual to the other through oral messages which are based on previous information. Dike K: (1976), eye witness accounts are supposedly the basic component of oral tradition; eye witness accounts are always a direct and personal experience as well and involve not only perception but also emotions. Vasira J: 1935

In today's society, the term "oral tradition" strikes us as odd since we live in a computer and media environments but the relevance of oral tradition,( myths, mythology and legends) as recoiled sources of history cannot be ignored. Although we, as a society may tell stories or pass on legends as we have seemingly strayed from where we began. We must observe that the human society has formed itself with the aid of oral tradition/speech, only to become literate much later in history. Andah B: (1984) For instance, homo sapiens has existed for more than 900,000 years but only as recently as 600,000 years have there been evidence of literacy.

Obviously, the absence of literacy did not prevent advancement and greatness amidst these early pre-literate societies.

### 2. Oral Tradition Galvanizes a Better Analysis of History

Oral tradition is a portent aspect of historical materials; it is an aspect that shapes most parts of historical sources. Johnson S: (1957).In writing history, there are various sources of materials available at the disposal of the historian which are the possibilities of gaining the accurate 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 are no more . Willa K: (1995) Historians rely on information on any evidence from the past, therefore anything; material or immaterial that bears witness to the past is a historical document or source. Edward Ives: (1994)

What is a historical source? A historical source is any material in whatever shape, form or size where study, analysis or interpretation, knowledge of past actions or events maybe gained. Historical sources are the raw materials out of which historians construct historical accounts by making references from them. Lord A: (1981) Thus, any information actually that survives from the past is a potential source of history. In this, historical sources such as ethnography, linguistic, archaeology and the natural sciences are useful particularly on how they are worth in any historical work done using an inter-disciplinary approach. Oral

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tradition as 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 community 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 political life. Thus, a sense of history and tradition has always been part of the African way of life. For instance, communities, families, clans, villages, towns or kindred have its established tradition concerning its origins. Miks J: (1983)

Oral tradition constitutes an integrative and cultural institution among most people. 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, and religion, healthcare 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.

Oral tradition as a source of history does not only express emotions but also pass across knowledge, record and represent the various social institutions and arts. The bulk of oral tradition comprises folktales which could be grouped into stories of divination, hunters' experience. Tales on love intrigue or betrayal, expiatory and moralizing tale such as legends forms most aspects of the myths and mythology. Oral tradition could also be ideological and maybe for classes, cults or associations such as practice, appellations, pride, poems (Yoruba Oriki), ritual utterance, epic ,folklores and myths of various types.

Historians, Archaeologists, linguists and Sociologists studied about lives of ordinary people and legends alike through spoken stories and tales. Oral historical materials provide important historical evidence about people especially minority groups, who were excluded from mainstream publications or did not leave behind written primary sources.

Oral tradition is as old as human beings, for before the invention of writing, information was passed from generation to generation through spoken words. Many people around the world continue to use oral traditions to pass along knowledge and wisdom. Interviews and recordings of community elders and witnesses to historical events provide existing stories, anecdotes and other information about the past.

### **3. Mythology and Historical Documentation**

The term mythology represents the study of myths or a body of myths. Numerous historians and scholars in their related fields use the term "myths" in somewhat different ways. In a very broad sense, myth is referred to any traditional history. The main characters in myths are usually gods, deities or supernatural heroes whose stories were usually sacred stories. Myths are often endorsed by rulers and priests and closely linked to religion in the society in which it is told. A myth is usually regarded as a true account of the remote and immediate past. Myths as traditions of the people are not invented, they are experienced. It is an aspect of orally transmitted tradition among various peoples of the world and form part and parcel of the history of the people. For instance, in the history of the origin of the Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa in Nigeria (West Africa); myths and mythology formed a major and it's widely accepted by various historians who trace the traditions and origin of the people. They are sacred narratives telling of scared things/beings and of semi divine heroes and of all things, usually through the agency of these scared beings.

The Bible which is highly considered as huge historical accounts contains numerous aspects of myths, legend and folklores. Apparently, numerous fields of study, ranging from History, Archaeology, Astronomy and Linguistics have used the Bible and its accounts to provide insight into their respective pursuits and understanding of ancient and modern culture, mythology, anthropology and morality – to name just a few – are enormously influenced and augmented by the Bible. Brooke A: (1991)

The Old Testament is best understood as the history of the Hebrew people and the origin of the Jewish religion. While numerous historians believed that the New Testament is the oral and historical accounts of Jesus and the development of modern Christianity as a religion. William D: (2006)

### **4. Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation**

Despite the fact that oral tradition and myths plays dominant roles in historical reconstruction and development, it is imperative to note that there are numerous backdrops associated with the use of these terms as reliable sources of history. Apparently, the use of oral tradition as historical source material is no doubt notoriously difficult. Chronology and lack of independence are real problems for oral traditions; but they can be alleviated in some cases by using other sources except the contents of oral tradition. This case will remain an exception rather than rule. As good as oral tradition maybe a source of materials for historical reconstruction, it is possible to still reinforce its information with written materials and vice versa.

Another problem with the use of oral tradition is that of dating. But we have to bear in mind that it is not always necessary to establish a chronology to write history. There are though other ways to appreciate history but in oral tradition and other sources such as myths and legends, chronology is not sacrosanct and it has been a potent weakness in historical writing and development.

At this point, it should be clear that for the historian, invalid or inconsequential oral tradition do not exist. Distortions and biases are much part of oral tradition, myths and legends as the original story or any so-called reliable source. But it is the historian's task to unravel that image with its constituent components and construct a new reliable historical picture out of them. To all intents and purposes, much can be drawn and learnt from oral tradition, myths and legends. They remain important sources of historical reconstruction despite their various limitations. It is advisable that oral traditions, myths and legends present are taken along or considered side by side with other available evidence of sources, they will facilitate a better and clear understanding of history.

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