

REVIEW ARTICLE

BOOK TITLE: ORAL TRADITION AS HISTORY

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Introduction

The book, *Oral Tradition as History*, is a remarkable achievement in African historical scholarship. It serves as an “intellectual shrine” for all historians interested in the reconstruction of the histories of traditional and even post-traditional societies. African historical reconstruction in particular has been made popular by this brilliant study to the extent that for any African historical research to have validity, the contributions of Jan Vansina through this work must be acknowledged, appreciated and referenced.

The book contains seven substantive chapters plus introduction and conclusion. Chapter one of this book, captioned ‘Oral Tradition as Process’ provides an excellent setting for the work. In this part, Jan Vansina gave the expression “Oral Tradition” as applying both to a process and to its products. The process is the transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message. On the other hand, the products are oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old. According to Jan Vansina, messages are generated in any situation in which people speak. Some of these messages, especially those that presents an “interpretation” of existing situations, are often repeated and these are often of special interest to the historian. News are often repeated on the ground that it is of some interest to the audience and often has some sensational value. The main point here is that such communications do not concern the past, but rather the present, and imply the future. Such information comes from eyewitnesses, hearsay, or internal

experience such as visions, dreams, or hallucinations. Jan Vansina did well to discuss these sources of information in detail. Eyewitness account, according to Vansina, is the “fountain head” of all history. This is in the sense that the informant must have participated in the event, or was a mere observer. These being the case, eyewitness accounts are always a personal experience and therefore, involve not only perception, but also emotions. The accounts are imperfect or partly reliable because people tend to report what they expect to see or hear more than what they actually see or hear. Thus, historians in the handling of eyewitness accounts for historical reconstruction, should exhibit caution.

Hearsay or rumour is transmitted from ear to mouth. It deals with sensational news, which makes for its acceptance. Many rumours have a basis, especially in a society without a writing culture or mass media and where speech is only the medium of communication. However, many are set to serve practical purposes such as to dishearten opponents, or to galvanize supporters. In this respect, they are untrustworthy. In practice, most false rumours tend to die out as the expected consequence of the rumour does not occur. Rumours that are not contradicted survive and become part of the store of oral history, and later also of oral tradition. Hearsay is therefore, the fountainhead of most traditions or most written documents. Vansina sums up by arguing that a tradition based on rumour tells us more about the mentality at the time of the happening than about the events themselves.

Visions, dreams and hallucinations are quite common perceptions. In certain societies, they are news, not only for the person who experience them, but for the whole community. All information of this nature is perceived as communication from the supernatural to the living and it is news. Visions of celestial beings or divine voices are prime examples of such sources. Often, visions by “innocent” persons such as children lead to the creation of sanctuaries and pilgrimages. The author concluded this part by giving an overview of oral history. He recounted the sources of oral history as reminiscences, hearsay and eyewitness accounts about events and situations, which occurred during the lifetime of the informants. This, he differentiated from oral traditions in that oral traditions are no longer contemporary. As messages are transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to them, they become oral traditions. This is the theses of the part II of Chapter I still under review. Vansina discusses in this part that among traditions exist different classes according to further evolution of the message. The first class consists of memorized messages and without it one distinguishes messages in everyday language (formula, prayer) from messages subject to special language rules (poetry). Among the later, one distinguishes again between formal speech (epic) and everyday language (narrative). Narratives themselves belong to two different classes according to the criterion of factuality. Some are believed to be true or false, others are fiction. Factual traditions or accounts are transmitted frequently – with more regard to faithful reproduction of content – than are fictional narratives such as tales, proverbs and sayings. According to Jan Vansina, the criterion lingers on the notion of truth, which varies from one culture to another and which must be studied. The author concludes this part by presenting the resulting categories of oral tradition as follows:-

1. memorized speech
2. accounts
3. epic, and
4. tales, proverbs and sayings.

Detail discussions of these categories are contained on pages 15-27 of the book.

Part III of chapter 1 is captioned “Oral Tradition as Source of History”. This part provided an opportunity for a comprehensive definition of oral traditions by Jan Vansina: as verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation. The definition specifies that the message must be oral statements, spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments only. The definition also makes clear that all oral sources are not oral traditions. There must be transmission by word of mouth over at least a generation. Jan Vansina’s definition does not claim that oral tradition must be “about the past” nor that they are just narratives. They encompass all the classes that have been described above. Oral tradition as evidence can be shown in the relationship between the event or the situation observed and the final recording made of it. If there is no link between the record and the observation, there will be no historical evidence. This part on “Evidence of What?” concludes the discussion on chapter 1. The central argument here is that it is always necessary to scrutinize traditions as they are in fact, expressions of generalizations or norms rather than statements of observations of events or situations. Accounts are therefore misleading even though only accounts directly testify to events. When it comes to reconstructing actual situations, accounts are very limited in usefulness because they are the historical consciousness of present and past generations. Tales are more reliable because they create a lifelike setting and give evidence about situations as they were actually observed as well as about beliefs concerning situations. Unfortunately, according to Vansina, they are still being neglected by historians.

Chapter II is captioned “Performance, Tradition and Text”. This part deals with the application of the rules of evidence of oral traditions. It also deals with how a tradition relates to a text that stems from it. The task of the historian when a writer’s document is being worked upon starts when he or she takes up such a document and begins to read it. In this case of written document, there is no apparent relationship between the historian on one hand and the ready-made document that confronts him on the other. In this situation, the classical rules of evidence are straightforward; in so far as one does not know the make up of this document both physically and as a message, its originality, its authenticity in terms of its claims, and other relevant information concerning whom the writer is, when and where in terms of its origin or source. Once answers to these posers are made available, the internal analysis of the content of the document can then proceed. The analysis of the document itself must always come first. But in the case where the historian is dealing with oral tradition, the situation is very different. The historian is now the “creator” of the piece of writing. He is now the recorder of the living tradition. The crucial question here now is: what is the relationship of the text to a particular performance of the tradition involved and what is the relationship of that performance to the tradition as a whole? Jan Vansina sums it up that it is when it is clear how the text stands to the performance and the latter to the tradition can an analysis of the contents of the message begin. This means that the questions of authenticity, originality, authorship, the place and time of composition must be asked at each of these stages. The crucial link is the performance. A performance is the normal expression of a whole tradition, the condition of its reproduction and those of the tradition itself. The concept “text” on the other hand implies a stable something that exists independently of all those who interpret it. It is a written item. The text is what testifies to something, but it is not a testimony.

Chapter three (3) of this effort discusses the question of recorded messages or simply put, “Getting the Messages”. A crucial question here is: What does the message mean? This chapter essentially deals with what and what are to be examined to provide a satisfactory answer to the above question. Once testimony is on record, it can be carefully studied. Reference could be made to it from time to time. The scholar will, however, attempt to understand rather than to study the message contained in the record. The form and structure must be studied first because they influence the expression of the content. Then comes an analysis of the meaning, which is usually done on two levels: the literal meaning and the intended meaning. The intended meaning is often quite obvious to members of the community that produced the tradition, but not so evident to any outsider. Then one can talk of the aim of the message – what one wanted to communicate. No message is total without a form. If it were, communication would not occur. The rule of language is the first formal requirement. Special rules for rendering a message in poetic or even narrative form do occur. Rules that restrict the choice of vocabulary in message expression must be known if the content is to be appreciated. Each message has also an internal structure, and arrangement of its exposition is necessary if communication must be effective. Finally in this chapter, the author writes that all messages fall into genres, a combination of form and content that yields literary categories well recognized and practiced in the society under study.

Chapter four (4) is captioned “The Message is a Social Product”. Communication presupposes society and therefore all messages are social products. Messages of oral tradition have a “social surface”. They are significant to members of the communities in which they are told. Otherwise, they would not be communicated at all. The message is created by the society, which is subject to recreation by historical change. Messages are often influenced by “social present”. The extent of such influences must always be assessed as the interpretation of any message will have to take such influences into consideration. Vansina here argued that the total content of oral tradition is created in the present for the society, and if the impact of the present is assessed, there remains no message at all from the past. This is the standpoint of sociologists. The sociological stance underscores the obligation of the scholar to investigate how the message relates to the social setting.

Chapter five (5) of Jan Vansina’s work is captioned “The Message Expressed Culture”. This part is in line with the notion that messages are part of a culture. They are expressed in the language of a culture and conceived, as well as understood, in the substantive cognitive terms of a culture. Hence, culture shapes all messages and this must be taken into account when we interpret messages. The author first examined the impact of the cognitive aspect of culture, that is, the impact of a given message on what is generally and commonly known as community. The symbolic aspects of the message, matters concerning image, clichés and their interpretation were also examined in this chapter. Details of these can be seen on pages 125-146.

In chapter six (6), Jan Vansina attempts to apply the standard rules of evidence to oral message. Such rules were however developed for the study of written texts. The most remarkable issue in this chapter according to the author, is that most information relating to oral tradition are not available in discrete packages, but are drawn from a single pool – pool that only exists in memories. To cope with this, we must go beyond the usual rules of evidence. As opposed to all other sources, oral tradition consists of information existing in memory. This information forms a vast pool – one that encompasses the whole of inherited culture; for culture is what is in the mind. It is a pool that is essential to the continuity of

culture and the reproduction of society from generation to generation. Tradition in memory are only distinguished from other more recent information by the conviction that they stemmed from previous generations, just as memory itself is only distinguished from other information by the conviction that the item is remembered, not dreamt or fantasised. . It follows from this characteristic of oral tradition as information remembered that there is a corpus of information in memory wholly different from a corpus of written documents. The effect of the dynamics of memory acting on the corpus forms the topic of the second section. The author also discussed the effects on chronology of a process in which inchoate memories cannot be dated and message remains ephemeral. An issue in this chapter that must be discussed in this review effort concerns chronology and information remembered. Each culture has its own notions of time, and calendars do not exist in oral society. We cannot date the depth of a tradition in any direct way; we can only date the recording of a performance or of testimony by an informant. The question now is, how can we then establish chronology? Chronology is essential to history. History deals with chains of change, that is, not with change as the result of preceding situation leading to later situations, but change as a product of causality. So history must have chronology. Chronology need not be based on an absolute calendar; it can be a relative sequence of events and situations only. Jan Vansina's effort examines in sequence, first, how time is measured in oral societies; how memory deals with sequence; and lastly, how oral sources could be used to establish chronology and how. Let us look at measurement of time. In line with the author's view, the cardinal directions of time everywhere are "before" and "after". Absolute measurement of time on a uniform scale exists nowhere in oral society. Time was, therefore, measured by the return of natural phenomenon, by the occurrence of extraordinary events, by reference to human lifespan, and reproduction as well as by reference to the return of recurrent social event. Every social organization corresponds with a time frame. Such a frame could be as short as two generations or even one generation deep, attain a depth of thirty or even sixty generations, or be as long as a given kingdom lasted. The author also discussed 'lists' and 'genealogies' as sources of dating in this chapter. These have to do with list of kings and generational age.

In chapter seven (7), Jan Vansina concluded this masterpiece by offering an assessment of oral traditions as a source of history. When one looks at the proneness of traditions to distortion and bias, lack of chronology in most oral societies, selectivity of the contents of the tradition, and so on, one may be forced to discard with oral tradition. But this should not be done in a hurry because according to the author, oral traditions have history to teach, and historians have accepted its utility in the writing of history especially in oral societies universally. This is so because not all traditions are automatically unreliable, even though all have limitations as we have already stated.

We would conclude this review by stressing that without oral traditions, we would know very little about the past of large parts of the world, and we would not know them from the inside. Most written traditions do not consider the past of the down-trodden, the so-called non-mainstream sector of the society. It over concentrates on the political elite, the powerful and history makers. This does not however make superior any source (written or oral) over the other. Whenever oral traditions are extant, they remain an indispensable source for historical reconstruction. They correct other sources, just as much as other perspectives correct it. Where there is no writing, oral traditions must bear the brunt of historical reconstruction.

On the whole, *Oral Tradition as History* has its shortcomings. In the first place, the language use is not simple for easy comprehension by both professional and amateur historians. Secondly, the author failed to appreciate or acknowledge the important role of indigenous African historians in upgrading the status of oral traditions as source of history. However, the book is a well-researched piece of work. There is enough evidence to show that the author is a painstaking researcher. Apart from academic excellence, the book is worthy of commendation and recommendation. The book should be a constant companion to all African and non-African historians with the intention of writing from the perspective of 'inside out' rather than from the 'outside in'. It should be a compulsory reading for post-graduate students in the process of embarking on their projects. This is because it is well organized and well structured with a beginning, middle, and an end.