



Oral Traditions and the Promotion of Unity, Security, Law and Order in Nigeria

ASENIME JUDE AZUKA
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract. This paper seeks to present the view that oral traditions, because of its importance as source of African history, can be an important intellectual tool for the promotion of national security, maintenance of law and order in the nation state. This is to achieve a thorough empirical research on the oral traditions of different Nigerian peoples. The expectation is to re-establish and re-order our perception of others and ourselves through the new histories in a more objective manner; thereby enshrining a renewed sense of genuine self-identification and collective group awareness, unity and solidarity between peoples and social groups in Nigeria. The contention is that oral traditions have both the essential qualities and potentialities of providing the real identities of different groups, their relationship and interaction in historical context. By extension, this could also be the important datum to use as the base for identifying areas of connections, similarities and dissimilarities as a significant parameter in preventing tensions and disorder, enhancing social unity and cohesion amongst the different peoples of Nigeria. This is a position that is tenable given the resources and commitment to maintaining objective and purposeful researches. The work derives its conclusions from narration, description and analysis of historical sources.

Keywords: Oral, Traditions, History, Security, Law and Order

1. Introduction

There are important concepts, which ought to be clarified in this paper. First, it is important to note that we are dealing with oral traditions, which are no longer contemporary and have passed from mouth to mouth, for a period beyond the lifetime of the

informants (Finnegan 1970; Vansina 1985). In other words, oral traditions are verbal messages as reported statements from the past beyond the present generation such as traditions of origin, which also include legends, myths, songs, rituals and installation ceremonies (Vansina 1985). These oral traditions differ from one another and even from the various versions of the traditions of the same group. The subsequent presentation examines the significance of oral traditions as sources of history that could help to promote Nigerian national unity, security, order and rule of law.

Second, Nigerian security perspective in this paper is seen from the standpoint of national unity, particularly from what Jega (2007) considered as a holistic conception. Thus:

Nigeria's National Security objectives can essentially, be defined in terms of the protection and defense of the country's territorial integrity, promotion of peaceful coexistence in the polity, containing/eliminating threats to internal security, ensuring systemic stability and bringing about sustainable socioeconomic development.

Furthermore, he elaborated, that:

In other words, in broad terms Nigeria's security objectives can be itemized as consisting the following concerns: peace and stability; ethno-religious/communal harmony; peaceful coexistence; food security; sustainable socioeconomic development; and democratic development; which involves strengthening the rule of law; creating a democratic political culture; nurturing civility; promoting good governance, transparency and accountability; facilitating institutional and structural reforms amenable to democratisation (Jega 2007).

After an exhaustive critical discourse of the concept of national security, Okpaga agrees with Jega in a concise manner that:

As a concept, it should be seen to refer to the stability of a nation to protect its internal values from external attacks. But in a wider sense, it applies to the national interest of a state, which must include political, socio-economic stability as well as defense and scientific development (Okpaga 2007).

Of course, other scholars in their varied assessments of Nigerian national security, law and order share this enlightened position (Alemika 2007). Intrinsically, therefore, the maintenance of law and order are the manifest and effectual derivative responsibilities of the agents and agencies of internal security network such as courts, police and the public. Therefore, the resultant effectiveness and impact of these mainly internal agents of national security is measured by the stability of the internal security situation. An essential condition for the conception of dynamic policy provisions, which provides the practical and concurrent functional external security environment. This is because of the over whelming dual significance of the national human and material factors as requisite variables in the evaluation, categorization of the degree and level of the internal security situation of the nation. Then it becomes of strategic national interest to make comprehensive database, with a historical knowledge profile of individuals, groups and peoples as a platform for promoting national identity and awareness. This is actually an intelligent and enlightened approach to a better-managed internal security, which if well taken will promote a more stable and focused national security framework.

Thus, the imperative of the use of oral traditions in Nigeria to promote national security lies in its importance as one of the authentic, widely assessable and acceptable germane source of different peoples' histories. The acquisition of such a compendium of histories is an urgent national priority, particularly when objectively and empirically employed in addressing issues of national importance. Hence, the object is for a comprehensive database of individuals, groups and peoples' identities, relations and interrelations since pre-colonial to most contemporary period to date suffices. This will establish our societies' first point of reference in solving relevant national problems and promoting aspirations-such as conflicts, conflict resolution and management as well as social mobilization for achieving set national goals and objectives. As such, oral tradition presents peculiar qualities and unique characteristics as an intellectual and practical asset

for the effective and efficient management of the Nigerian societies and peoples' needs and aspirations embedded in their backgrounds, relations and interrelations. By extension and implication, if successfully organized and documented, then information from oral tradition will make it much easier to position most of the citizenry towards the required national goals for a stable, progressive and sustainable social, political and economic development as a panacea for a sound national security, law and order in Nigeria.

2. Uses of Oral Traditions in Promoting Nigerian Unity, Security, Law and Order

There are specific and general parameters of the use of oral traditions for promoting national security in the Nigerian nation state. In specific terms, it involves the intrinsic use primarily of oral traditions as a means of gathering, documenting and utilisation of the information for a better-informed policy decisions and solution on national issues including security. In general, it deals with the use of oral traditions in a collaborative, correlative, contextual and multidisciplinary manner that will provide a solid base for comprehensive research discourse and outputs. This is significant because of the neglect and in fact deliberate attempt by external powers and government of Nigeria to undermine the teaching of history in schools. The apparent dearth of historical knowledge, consciousness and conscience in the country, particularly deriving from oral traditions, suggests an urgent need to do so in the national interest. This is because a country that does not treasure its history is definitely on the brink of a gross loss of its national identity and memory. Moreover, such knowledge is crucial for creating the necessary national awareness, group solidarity and collective sense of togetherness needed for national cohesion and peaceful coexistence. Thus, overlooking the vital importance of oral tradition as source of historical information that can be employed to help raise awareness and prevent conflict between groups. In this regard, oral tradition is seen as a significant means of gathering and storing original information about Nigerian societies, which can be used to better the societies individually and collectively through the lessons of the past about the hows and whys past problems were solved or even prevented from happening.

Therefore, it will not be an over emphasis to state that the collection and documentation of the oral traditions of most peoples of Nigeria is long overdue. This is in the sense that a thorough collection of the oral traditions of the Nigerian peoples will fill in the

existing gap of not only the lack of documented history of many communities in the country, but also the loss of vital information from the death of a host of generations of informants. An ongoing process of elimination that denies us the privileges and advantages associated with the conservation of our vital national historical heritage. The proposed conservation measure will also promote a purposeful drive towards these neglected histories and bringing about new knowledge of identities and realities as well as establishing the different forms of historical affinities of Nigerian peoples in historical times. In this way, it is expected that concordant social bonds will be established and promoted rather than present cultivation of discord and disorder.

Examples of such an assertion is classically imbedded in traditions of origin of some Nigerian societies, such as the legends of Saif bin Dhi Yazan said to be the founder of the Saifuwa dynasty of Kanem-Borno, Bayajida also said to be the founder of the Hausa *Bakwai* and *Banza Bakwai* city-states and the Oduduwa myth of creation among the Yoruba. These traditions have not been fully explored of their historical contents. Nonetheless, they now at least present a common rallying point for the different concerned groups' identities and largely act as an important reference point for self-projection of these societies in the Nigerian enterprise (Smith 1987; Hallam 1966; Smith 1970; Smith 1971; Smith 1983; Lange 2004). Therefore, when the examination and analyses of other national legends are made professionally, it will add new historical information about the other peoples of Nigeria and it will be an asset to our national knowledge base, which could be used for the promotion of peace (Smith 1987; Atanda 1980). Furthermore, an extensive assessment and objective interpretation of these legends is imperative. More so, as they specifically speak of historical narratives of times since 'the beginnings', after the original culture-founders had departed their earthly lives to assume positions of spiritual advisers, an aspect that is still beclouded in mystery. However, the humanisation of these legends by linking them to human progenies, who are currently identified as ruling houses, dynasties, priests and title-holders deeply involved in the actual running of their societies speaks a lot about a yet to be decoded intellectual history of pre-colonial Nigeria. Indeed, it also pinpoints to the historical mindset that provided the base for the self-sufficiency of pre-colonial Nigerian societies (Stevens 1978; Smith 1987; Lange 2004; Abubakar 1996).

Although, some of such traditional stories are popularly regarded as historical even though

unauthenticated (Henige 1971; 1974; 1982), nonetheless, by using the proper techniques and processing of oral data, original and authentic information could be derived from custom, opinion or belief handed down to posterity especially orally or by practice (Curtins 1968; Stevens 1975; Sutton 1979; Ajayi 1980; Newbury 1007). These include the process of handing down established practice or custom as well as literary principles based on experience and practice, theological doctrine or a particular doctrine that claimed to have divine authority without documentary evidence. This is especially apparent in the oral teachings such as that of Christ and the Apostles, the laws held by the Pharisees to have been delivered by God to Moses, the words and deeds i.e. the *Sunnah* and *Hadith* of Muhammad (SAW) not in the Qur'an (Vasina 1985; Vasina 1990; Afigbo 1978). In our context, one could add the incantations of the traditional priest (i.e. *Babalawo*, *Bagobira* of *Bori* cult or *tsafi*), medicine men, praise songs of the hunters, blacksmith and local barbers, installation ceremonies and ritual rites of different Nigerian, indeed African groups (Parrinder 1976; Denyer 1978:52-53).

In the same regards, we may mention myth as another important aspect of oral history, which originally is derived from the Greek word *mythos*, meaning that branch of knowledge, which is indisputable, not subject to rational argument-as distinct from *logos* (Stevens 1987; Levi-Strauss 1964). Myth is mostly made up of traditional narratives usually involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural and social phenomena. These include narrations collectively that are widely held but involved the use of false notions, fictitious person, things or ideas in the form of allegories, wise sayings, riddles and jokes as coded behavioral and attitudinal orientation messages. Similar to the platonic myth – mythology – i.e. as a body of myths (as in the Greek mythology), the Yoruba myth of creation and the *Mune* as a *talisman* in the emergence of the Seifuwa dynasty in Kanem-Borno etc. Nonetheless, myths held an important sway over the traditions and cultural history of people so affected and influenced a lot more, which can only be known and appreciated if decoded and a proper factual interpretation no matter how bizarre is presented as done in some cases (Lange 2004; Newbury 2007).

Ritual is 'rites of installation of kings... tied to annual rites of renewal in the kingdom and were charters for privileges of particular local groups involved in these rituals...' (Vasina 1985:99; Lange 2004:166-179). Therefore, ritual is a prescribed order

of performing rites, involves procedure regularly followed or done as rites. It also involves installation ceremony as the act or an instance of installing personality with some responsibility or role. Where the ceremony is associated with ritual, it assumes a formal religious or public occasion, especially celebrating a particular event or anniversary. In addition, it refers to formalities, especially of an empty or ritualistic kind. No wonder, despite the spate of nationalism and democratisation, still traditional institutions and social-political titles assumes significance and relevance. This is whether it is political titles like the Mai, Oba, Obi, Sarki or Emir and Shehu or social titles such as *Malam* or *Alimi*, *Babalawo* or *Boka*, who usually must have under gone certain formalities of bestowment or installation rituals rights going back into classical ancestry of the respective groups.

It is also important to stress the significance of song categorized to include poetry, epic, chant and other verse forms, which are not subject to restrictions of the sort that govern myth, but are records of the times with more information (Stevens 1978). In other words, short poem or other set of words set to music or meant to be sung. These include singing or vocal music, a musical composition suggestive of a song, the musical cry of some birds, a short poem in rhythmic stanzas and archaic poetry verse.

In the light of the above conceptualization and in general terms the subsequent analysis is to show the significance of Onomastics such as toponyms, anthroponyms and hydronyms to the study of oral traditions. However, it must be made clear that Onomastics is the science of the study of names, which is first a linguistic field of study. However, as a means of academic pursuit for knowledge it touches and covers all disciplines such as history, geography, anthropology, demography etc. In the context of Nigerian indeed African history, it is used as a linguistic method in the study of historical sources, namely the oral traditions of Nigerian peoples. This is advocated as a positive scientific multi-disciplinary approach in the study and reconstruction of the uncharted and muddled field of African oral history. The assertion of the significance and potentiality of this field of studying African history using a linguistic scientific method is clear as advocated by Vansina (1973) and by Diagne (1981). However, in our regional and sub-regional context, the works that relates to this theme and the area of study are on toponyms, namely Gouffe (1967), Greene (1969), Sa'ad (1987), Ibrizimow) (1991) and Rothmaler (2003).

In this light, it is necessary to state that this field of multidisciplinary study establishes a methodological approach that allows for the retrieval of more information about our societies. It therefore, adds new historical information from oral traditions and other related disciplines like linguistic. Moreover, it also makes it possible for more plausible interpretation of migratory processes and establishment of habitat as well as complimenting in filling the gap between written and oral sources- thereby bringing about unity in diversity of these different sources of African studies. Therefore, toponyms are designated to place names like towns, lands, while patronyms are those places with personal names of historical figures. These represent one of the reference keys that languages offer for detecting historical contacts, convergences and influences (Diagne 1981; Pamp 2000; Caprini 2000). In the same regards, patronyms are personal names relating to certain historical happenings connected with historical figures, which when correctly detected and analysed will be of great significance in comparative study. Such as between seeming Islamic or Arabic and non-Islamic/Non- Arabic names based on the rendering of the "original" Islamic/Arabic names. (Ibrizimow 1996:97:1991; Lange 2004). In addition, anthroponomy and hydronyms are the names of rivers, lakes etc. derived from certain historical identification based on directional or geo-spatial considerations and socio-economic significance. This encapsulated information could be explored and explained through a thorough research of oral traditions in the area(s) concerned. All these are very important ways in deriving extensive information, which are of practical utilities to other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, geography, political science, economic history etc.

3. Conclusion

It is apt to state that the above submission is actually a preliminary discourse of an overview possible utility value of the research, collection and documentation of oral traditions of Nigerian peoples as a means of promoting national security, law and order. It will in fact be effective, valuable when fully realized, first, in the establishment of grand interdisciplinary approach, multidisciplinary methodology, and sound analyses of the expected empirically objective knowledge based on historical information about the people of Nigeria. Such a strategic and classified national knowledge base data will not only serve as a means of creating national awareness, unity and solidarity, but also for identifying possible weak links, from past explosive experiences as threats to national cohesion

beforehand. It will also make it possible to predict trends of events, thereby proffering resolution or restitution measures from our historical experience before the situation explodes into conflagration. The hope again, is to enrich historical knowledge to enable the creation of the enabling environment and atmosphere that stabilizes the internal security situation. This will have to be through strategizing of policies for promoting peaceful coexistence, rule of law and orderly function of a united Nigerian society from the local to the national levels or from the bottom to the top. To have such a reservoir of a deep-rooted down to earth societal knowledge with a popular proactive setting and acceptance, which connects the societies together we ought to get a genuine all encompassing panacea. The best option is the use of oral traditions as advocated above in pursuit of our history as the source of national unity, peace and prosperity.

References

- Abubakar, S., 1996, 'A preliminary examination of the traditions of eastern origin and migration among some major Nigerian ethnic groups', in *Papers On Nigerian History Vol. 1*, ed, Sa'ad Abubakar, (Abuja, Suffa Nigeria Ltd.) pp. 10-22.
- Afigbo, A.E. 1978, 'Monocausal Explanation in African History: A Prevalent Distortion', in *Tarikh Vol. 6 No. 1, Historical Method*, London, Longman, pp. 31-39.
- Ajayi, J.F.A. 1980, 'A Critique of Themes Preferred by Nigerian Historians', in *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria (JHSN)*, Vol. X. No. 3, Dec. pp. 33-39.
- Alemika, E. E. O. 2007, 'Law enforcement and order maintenance in a democratic transitional society: The challenges of the Nigerian police', in I.G.P. Sunday Ehindero et al. eds. *Nigeria Police and Civil Society*, Jos, National Orientation Agency and Nigeria Police Force, pp. 143-167.
- Atanda, J.A. 1980, 'The Historian and the Problem of Origins of Peoples in Nigerian Society', *JHSN*, X, 3 Dec. pp. 63-77.
- Caprini (Genova), R. 2000, 'The Semantics of Proper Names', in Rudolf Šramek von Dieter Kremer, Band II *Namensysteme im interkulturellen Vergleich*, Akten des 18. Internationalen Kongresses für Namenforschung Trier. 12-17. April 1993, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, pp. 31-35.
- Connah, G. 1983, 'Some contributions of Archaeology to the study of the History of Borno' in B. Usman and N. Alkali eds. *Studies in the History of Pre-colonial Borno*, NNPC, Zaria.
- Curtins, P. 1968, 'Field techniques for collecting and processing oral data', in *Journal of African History (JAH)*, IX, 3: pp. 367-285.
- Denyer, S. 1978, *African Traditional Architecture*, New York, African Publishing Co. pp. 53-54.
- Diagne, P. 1981, 'History and linguistics', in J. Ki-Zerbo ed. *General History of Africa. 1, UNESCO, Paris*, pp. 233-260.
- Finnegan, R. 1970, *Oral Literature in Africa*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Gouffe, C. 1967, 'Problemes de toponymie haoussa: les noms de villages de la region de Maradi (Republique du Niger)', *Revue Internationale d'Onomastique 2*, pp. 95-127.
- Hallam, W. 1966, 'The Bayajida legend in Hausa Folklore', in *JAH*, VII, 1: pp.47-60.
- Henige, D. 1982, "Truth yet unborn? Oral tradition as q casualty of culture contact", in *JAH*, 23, 3: pp. 395-412.
- _____ 1971, 'Oral tradition and chronology', in *JAH*, XII, 3: pp. 371-389.
- _____ 1974, *The Chronology of Oral Tradition, Quest for a Chimera*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Ibriszimow and Gimba 1994 "Toponyms", in Dymitr Ibriszimow and Alhaji Maina Gimba eds. *Bole Language and Documentation Unit – BOLDU Report 1*, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Köln, pp.85-100.
- _____ 1996, "Girgam – The History of the Bole (Fika) People", in D. Ibriszimow ed. *BOLDU – Report II, Koln, Rudiger Koppe*, 13-15.
- Jega, A. M. 2007, 'Challenges to the achievement of Nigeria's security objectives', in Attahiru M. Jega, *Democracy; Good Governance and Development in Nigeria*, Ibadan, Spectrum Books Ltd., pp. 191-202.
- Kirk-Greene, A. 1969, 'The meaning of place names in Hausaland', *Bulletin de l'I.F.A.N. XXXI, sér B, no. 1*, pp. 95-127.
- Lange, D. 1987, *A Sudanic Chronicle: The Borno Expeditions of Idris Alauma, 1564-1576*, Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner Verlag.
- _____ 2004: *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa, Africa-centred and Canaanite-Isrealite Perspectives* (A collection of published and unpublished studies in English and French), Dettelbach, Verlag J.H. Roll GmbH.
- Levi-Strauss, C. 1964, *Mythologiques. 4 vols, Paris* (quoted from *Vasina 1985: pp. 208 and 237*).

- Newbury, D. 2007, 'Contradiction at the heart of the canon: Jan Vansina and the debate over oral historiography in Africa, 1960-1985', in *History in Africa*, 34: pp. 213-254.
- Okpaga, A. 2007, 'Enhancing National Security in Nigeria Through Non-Military Perspectives', in J.P. Dada and Armstrong M. Adejo eds. *Issues in History and International Studies Essays in Honour of Professor D. S.M. Koroma*, Makurdi, Aboki Publishers, pp. 82-108.
- Pamp (Lund), B. 2000, 'Towards a classification of proper names', in R. Šramek von Dieter Kremer, Band II *Namensysteme im interkulturellen Vergleich*, Akten des 18. Internationalen Kongresses für Namenforschung Trier, 12-17. April 1993, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag, pp. 25-30.
- Parrinder, E.G. 1974, *African Traditional Religion*, London, Sheldon Press.
- Rothmaler, Eva. 2003, *Ortnamen in Borno (Nordnigeria)*, Köln, Rudiger Koppe Verlag.
- Sa'ad, H.T. 1987, "Reflections on Fulfulde Toponymy: A study of Fulbe Towns in Old Adamawa Emirates", *Annals of Borno* IV, pp. 7-24.
- Smith, A. 1971, 'Early states of central Sudan', in A Ajayi and M Crowder eds. *History of West Africa* 1, London, Longman, pp. 152-195.
- _____. 1983, 'The Legend of the Saifuwa: A study in the origin of a legend of origin', in *Studies in the History of Pre-Colonial Borno*, eds. B. Usman, and N. Alkali, Zaria, Northern Nigerian Publishing Company Ltd. Pp. 16-56.
- _____. 1987, *A Little New Light, Selected Historical Writings of Abdullahi Smith*, Vol. 1 Abdullahi Smith Centre for Historical Research, Zaria, Gaskiya Corporation Ltd.
- Stevens Jr., P. (1975) 'The Kisra legend and the distortion of historical tradition', in *JAH*, XVI, 2: pp. 185-200.
- _____. (1978) 'The uses of oral traditions in the writing of African history', in *Tarikh Vol. 6 No. 1, Historical Method*, London, Longman, pp. 21-30.
- Sutton, J.E.G. 1979, 'Towards a less orthodox history of Hausa land', in *JAH*, 20: pp. 179-210.
- Vansina, J. 1985, *Oral tradition as History*, London.
- _____. 1985, 'Oral tradition and its methodology', in J. Ki-Zerbo ed. *General History of Africa Vol. 1*, Paris, UNESCO, pp. 54-61.