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THE METHODOLOGY OF ORAL TRADITION IN KENYA

Personal Experience and Hints

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PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND HINTS

Whenever I go to the field to collect historical data for a project, I find that I am learning some new items of methodology. At times what I used previously or in a certain area or even with a certain informant becomes ineffective with the new project. What is still effective might need some modification to operate under new or different circumstances. It is with the above and similar experiences in mind I write this brief paper. I wish to share my experiences with those who have the same or different ones and foster some hints to those who intend to do oral research some of whom have confronted me with questions as to how it all operates. My answer to the last question has often been that I do not know of a universal methodology even for Kenya or Africa because different groups, people, times and even researchers themselves respond differently. However, one can talk of some general principles that can be used as guide lines as the researcher molds a methodology relevant to a group, area or time as the case may be.

ORAL TRADITION

What is oral tradition? Many varied answers can be given for this question. These could range from the classical definition, which regards oral tradition as the 'fixed' information passed orally from one generation the next till present, to this writer's views which, as will be shown below include such things as observation and eye witnesses as aspects of it. In between these two definitions will be found others such as:

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Oral traditions are stories told about the past, but they are not history as we know it today. They are legendary accounts full of the exploits of heroic ancestors and rich in cultural imagery relating to the development of a people, much like the Old Testament. They abstract the main lessons from the Past and compress these into a single elegant message for the present and are concerned exclusively with the major themes in the development of a people rather than the minor digressions that may have accrued along the way.

Joseph Miller sees the narrative oral tradition as "the most problematic sort of oral historical source", which is, "though often indirect, muffled, and mixed in complex ways with information from the present."²

THE METHODOLOGY

Methodology in our context is taken as the art of collecting the oral tradition data or/and eliciting information orally. It is this data which is used finally as a source of historical information. This information can be used immediately or stored for future use. A good oral historian will collect indiscriminately materials in the pre-colonial and colonial or even post-colonial historic epochs. The main tasks of this paper include tackling methodology as a problem, discussing problems this writer found in the field and providing some hints towards solving them. The methodology is a long process that ranges from the selection of a research field through the struggle with various problems, approach proper to the interpretation of the data collected.

One begins by selecting the research field as dictated by various reasons or stimuli. Before embarking on actual field work, it is important to have plenty of background information or orientation of various aspects of that place. Such aspects of the area like geography, politics, economy, language, psychology and culture should be understood at an introductory or elementary level. It is such a knowledge which becomes the foundation on which to build one's research especially during the approach and even interpretation periods.

Included in the selecting of the place or field is the selection of the subject and/or period. When this has been done, the selection of sources of the material which includes informants follows.

Coupled with the above, a researcher faces the problem of budgeting. This involves many issues depending on the nature of the work. Included here are finances of equipment or the research tools, accomodation and subsistence payment for assistants, travel, traditional gifts and processing of materials. Time, the local language' (s) and the researcher's "foreignness" or being "an outsider" can also become serious problems that cause concern.

APPROACH

The approach to an ^{oral} research is actually the deciding factor as to the suscess or otherwise of the project. It is the most essential factor once the researcher is in the field. Approach also has many aspects beginning with as, apparently unimportant ones like personal appearance through the researcher's winning the confidence of the informants to the actual mechanics of gathering the information.

In approaching a new locality on field work, the researchers appearance is the first thing the locality or informants-to-be respond to. The response could be that of outright acceptance, that of passive or active resistance, indifference, fear or suspicion or such like. The researcher could be suspected of being any of the persons the locality might not favour such as a tax clerk, a rogue, a C.I.D. or other important officer or person.

All these and their peers are approached by informants with much caution if not avoided altogether. With the background knowledge mentioned earlier, the researcher should know the appearance that would not bring suspicion but acceptance. As a general rule simplicity in dress and manners plus natural genuineness appeals more positively than artificial impositions and grand shows. At times and in places, even a car might be a disadvantage at the beginning.

Once one is introduced to an area, the next move is cultivating the confidence of the locality. One way of doing this is to carry a government authority like a sub-chief, Chief, Soldier or Councillor with you especially during the early-stages. This is especially where the local people are too suspicious of new people or strangers. Another way is to move with local people who are acceptable in the community. A third method is to stay in the area mixing up with the people gradually until you are accepted. This is really the ideal way when you live with, and among, them participating as much as possible in their way of life. The problem here is the shortage of time as said earlier. Whichever method or methods one takes, the secret is to appear genuine natural to, and 'at home' with them. Where interest is displayed, it should appear genuine, not curiosity for some type of a 'museum piece'.

One should have plenty of self-discipline which hides over-curiosity or eagerness, that appreciates the community's way of life and sentiments. Go slowly, disguisingly inquisitive and very observant into issues that need caution like rituals, secrets and belief systems - surely, one can 'read between the lines'. There are some secrets that will not be let out to the researcher easily but, apart from observation and thought, one can use some of the members of the cult who look approachable, like the 'modernised' members who have undergone rituals.

One has to learn to appear civil, respectful and a little knowledgeable. Some societies do not appreciate a grown up who appears - or proves - empty-headed! It is the same when the researcher looks too knowledgeable. One must strike a balance.

Cultivating acceptance or confidence of the community, it is very essential that you become not only casual but one of them. This will mean that as you participate, apparently, genuinely in their way of life, you have to do such things as attending local activities like harambee meetings, funeral or birth ceremonies, church affairs and weddings besides being identified with some of the acceptable families. It is noted that if one is following the manners or etiquette of the community genuinely, meaningfully, and unreservedly, the one does not only have his/her shortcomings and mistakes sympathised with but gets more 'teachers'. After all, one comes to meet more and more informants as well as guides. It is equally noted that the smallest useful thing you do to the community like taking a sick person for medical treatment, a funeral or other ceremony spreads your fame positively far and wide in the society and environment as a whole. This does wonders in paving your way for the future work when you get to these areas.

Once accepted, one can embark on the exercise of gathering data. One crucial thing to do is to choose as your time for the visit a period that is suitable for the informants, not you. This could depend on weather - like when they are not busy planting because the rains have just fallen, weeding or harvesting for agricultural communities. The times that interfere with livestock systems like grazing, branding or rituals should be avoided in pastoral societies unless one wanted to capitalise on the issues. Some times are given to mourning or seclusion of same type, one should not choose such. Famine times, when people are pre-occupied with what to eat, should be cautiously chosen if not avoided.

Normal times or those of plenty and jubilation have their own merits and demerits. The point to stress here is, 'choose the most appropriate time'.

The above choices apply to whatever of the two main research methods used by researchers in different areas of Kenya and under varying circumstances. These methods are the group and individual interviews. For group interviews informants meet the researcher in one central or convenient place. Issues, as required by the researcher or thought fit by the group, are debated and agreed upon. The researcher records the agreed views mainly. At times the researcher records the views that were not agreed upon. The demerits of this method include the possibility that the agreed views might be those of one influential informant person. It is also known that some of the views that are suppressed might be very useful. Shy members of the group often end up by not being heard even though they may have useful views. The merits of this method include much saving of both time and money by having to convene one meeting of say ten or more people only once as opposed to ten or more different sessions. The researcher also feels some psychological satisfaction for having the 'majority and agreed views' as opposed to individual and uncoordinated ones.

The individual interviews method recommends that every informant or perhaps a small group of informants - normally two or three - be dealt with exhaustively before going to the next informant. This method is very expensive financially and time wise. But it gives each person a chance and privacy to air his or her views without fear of the 'spokesman' or shyness. It gives one a chance of following his or her own knowledge or memory without being influenced by others. This enables the bringing forward of minute details and episodes or issues peculiar to only that person or family which might be useful during the period of interpretation and compiling.

To achieve success in individual interviews the researcher has to do some type of reconnoitring trips in the field and visiting the would-be-informants first. During this venture, the researcher does some elementary interviews so as to discover the knowledgeable persons and even here, who is knowledgeable in what. This reconnoitre gives the research a chance to map out the research area before going back for thorough interviews. It is recommended that during this second or so trip, the researcher goes to work right in the familiar surroundings of the informants and concentrates on the aspects of knowledge earmarked during the reconnoitre period.

~~It~~ ~~He~~ is, perhaps, useful to point out here that the above two interviewing methods have been used with success. B.A. Ogot used the group method among the southern Luo while G.S. Were did the same among the Abaluyia.³ C. Muriuki mixed group and individual interviews in Gikuyuland while Mwaniki has used the individual interview method with very few groups interviews of under five members.⁴ Without belabouring the point, it is practically proven that a mixture of both individual and group methods give relatively suitable results and moderate the expenses. But where possible, this writer prefers individual interviews and only a few small group ones after all the material has been collected, mainly for checking and confirming purposes.

Meetings for interviewing whether individual or group can be frustrating to say the least. This is when the researcher makes a lot/of efforts to attend an appointment and finds the informant either absent, not in a mood of sitting for an interview or having changed to a 'hostile informant' since the researcher communicated ~~past~~. Many different things, all negative to the researcher, can happen - including an informant changing his/her mind to talk during the interviewing session. At times informants talk but avoid the salient issue intentionally. One could be sitting and conducting an interview and this could be interrupted to the detriment of the work for that whole day or longer.

One can argue that a researcher ^{is} also usually eager to come to a conclusive end of an interview, not the beginning of it. What one should understand here is that once the interview is interrupted, it means further expenditure of both money ^{and} time if it has to be re-done as well ^{as} interference with the rest of the schedule. It has at times, happened that I have postponed an interviews due to one or more of the reasons like the above and then either never managed to get back again or found the informant dead in my follow up visit!

However, the best a researcher does ^{is} to remain composed and tolerant ^{because} showing true feelings of either disappointment or non-appreciation might affect the future of the project. All the foregoing calls for patience and plenty of time which a researcher might not unfortunately have - as well as painful expenditure. This point equally applies even when the informants are not hostile but are not ^{feeling} a researcher in the hurried way this researcher would like so as to finish quickly and perhaps beat a 'deadline'. Veterans of the oral tradition discipline including expatriates have understood the above as deduced from Vansina when he records:

The historian is in a hurry and counts on understanding the message of the text by reading additional texts. Africans chide us for hurrying, for not lingering over an oral communication to savor its bouquet, to meditate about it. To w make it part of one's intellectual personality, rather the way one savors poetry. We must learn to do this if we want to use oral traditions as sources for history. We must learn to slow down.

It is difficult either to emphasise the issue of patience enough or exaggerate it. Suffice it to say that one has to cultivate much patience and tolerance, even to insults, being chided or laughed at in ^{the} course of the research.

SITTING AN INTERVIEW

After securing an interview comes the collection of 'harvesting' time when the researcher sits with the informant(s). The researcher is usually well armed with the tools of the trade. These include a questionnaire, writing materials such as pen/pencil and paper. Tape recording material are included either as supplements to the writing ones or replacement of the same. Beginning with the identities of the informant (including address, locality, genealogy etc.) the interview starts with either the researcher's question or voluntary information coming from the informant; either as a new point or follow up of an item of the identity. Practically, one even finds the research beginning before the identity is done. Whichever ~~it~~ begins, this writer approves since the point is to get as much useful information as possible and so whatever is comfortable and natural makes the informant at home is commendable.

This point of where and how to begin is important since a nervous or strained start can affect the results. It brings us to the researcher's tool named questionnaire above. Should the questionnaire be used? Should it be adhered to strictly? Just how does one use a questionnaire? The above and similar questions linger in minds of researchers especially as one plans a project. My simple response to them is that one needs a questionnaire flexibly and as naturally and practically as possible. What this means is that one should not be glued to the document entirely as this often annoys informants. Informants often like to talk of what interests them, not the researcher's requests. Often, the interests of the informants are useful materials which the researcher might not have thought of. So it is worthwhile paying attention to them. What one usually does is to listen to what one considers useful or "switch oneself off" if the informant is definitely unhelpful. Then when there is a cue to change the subject, the researcher does so and "switches oneself on" again.

But the last thing to do is to tell the informant that he/she is irrelevant or not helpful or even to show impatience. This writer usually carries a questionnaire and asks questions in it in the order that appear appropriate to the informant then ticks off what has been answered till all have been attempted. A questionnaire should always have room for further questions brought about by the informants, thought of as the informants' talk or even posed by 'observers'.

What sort of questions should a questionnaire contain? One should plan questions which lead to telling a continuous story or building to a climax as opposed to those that move 'back and forth', like from present to ancient past to present and recent past. A question on origin of a society, for example, can start with the informants genealogy to the sub-clan, then clan and sub-ethnic group and finally the ethnic group itself. This could also work the other way round, that is from the ethnic group to the individual. The questions should be normal and ~~researching~~ as opposed to sensitive and leading. Leading questions tend to draw one word answers or just one sentence. Usually polite informants give affirmative answers to these trying to please the questioner. Leading questions are such as "were you looking after Livestock?" or "Were you not looking after livestock?". These are opposed to searching ones like "What was your economy composed of?" or "tell me what you did to get food and wealth". This last request is also an example of a method of eliciting information in a descriptive way to vary direct questions like "What did you do to get food and wealth?" Sensitive questions like "Were you defeated because your warriors had earlier committed atrocities against your enemies?" or "because your leader was a Usurper?". Try and avoid those that either offend or put the informant on his/her guard.

As said above, to enable you harvest the information, it is necessary to use either writing or tape re-cording. Scholars have for long debated over the merits and demerits of each one of these and there is no need of indulging into the same here. Suffice it to note that writing takes too long a period as compared to tape-recording that takes the speed of talking. Writing also has a chance of being interpreted as taking down data for taxation or court purposes - a cannotation of colonial times of hut and poll - taxes as well as forced labour. Tape recording is often forgotten psychologically by informants after the first few minutes of the start as they are carried away by the zeal of what they are relating. However, this also depends on the society; suspicious or even superstitious societies object to a tape-recorder for to them, it is a 'ghost' that can harm. But in central Kenya, the "Mwaria - Mbarie" or "speaker of what has been spoken" is a good and welcome companion and entertainer after the interview. The researcher also can store and transcribe "at leisure", almost undergoing a possibly forgotten interview, long after the end of the session. But writing must be done at the time of the interviewing. However, the expenses of tape recording that includes the machine, tapes, power or energy and pen/paper later can only be left to the reader to decide as to which method he/she should use.

Nevertheless, there is one advantage of tape-recording that needs be mentioned. This is the leaving of the interviewer more free to observe and listen more leisurely and attentively. Gestures or facial expressions made by the informant tell what the words might fail to convey. These are more observable when tape-recording than when writing. This can be termed observation. With this the researcher should combine the observation of landscapes, material cultural items, discarded projects, sites and even ways of life.

Many of these will help in deciding as to how far what is being said could have been true, practical or even possible. One could even see other perspectives. A camera, where possible, should be taken along and used as one tool of recording. Geographical sceneries, material culture remains, physical appearance of the informants and whatever else one feels could help in conveying a visual impression should be photographed for final inclusion in the text being researched for.

PROCESSING AND INTERPRETATION

The climax of all the above struggle comes with compiling ^{which} includes the interpretation of the materials by the researcher on the basis of what was collected as well as his/her assessments.

^{It is} ~~If~~ at this stage that the whole is made from the many disjointed and often apparently inconnectdd bits of material from different informants, observation and other sources. It is at this stage that the revelation of distortions in oral tradition is done and put right in light of other evidences; it is also here where a researcher realises that there are societies with two versions of information namely official and private. The official version is told those who are considered "foreign" or have not won the informant's confidence. The private is told the insiders and those that the informants have confidence in. At times a research begins with getting the official and so legendary or fabricated versions and ends up, as time passes by getting the private and so genuine material. The Chuka of Meru and the Agikuyu between 1920 and 1964 are good examples here. Hence the importance of the final processing, when the compiler has to decide as to what to give to the consumer. To decipher the distortions is not an easy task but considerable and all round collection plus observation and critical discussions and thinking make it possible to sought out the non-genuine and replace with the genuine.

Another important aspect here is to use materials from the neighbouring societies. These do not only provide checks and corrections but balances and supplements.

CONCLUSION

This brief paper has tried to sketch the practical aspects of the methodology of oral tradition. Practical because the writer, although using a generalised tone for applicability in most of Kenya, has actually used and tested it mainly among some Mt. Kenya societies like Embu/Mbeere, Kirinyaga Gikuyu and some groups of the Meru such as the Chuka, Tharaka and Mutharbi. It is clear in the paper that the problem of funds and time have been left untackled - intentionally for the writer has no solutions. The research^{er} will have to make do with the little available, perhaps "be born" in research zones to lessen travel and accomodation expenses or beg donations, seek grants from within and without or get sympathisers if lucky.

It is clear also that the paper is not exhaustive. It has only given an aspect of, the writer's experience and some hints. Implicit here is that every area has its own methods or approaches. Different researchers will also differ in approaches as they do in interests. It is here suggested that if we all wrote our experiences, a type of a researcher's handbook or manual could be compiled for Kenya. But for the time being interested researchers have to do their best with the methodology "on the job training" or is it "trial and error"? However, cautious! used and with patience and adequate time, they should be able to achieve their goals and do a memorable job for Kenya in particular and Africa in general.

Footnotes

1. Spear, T. Kenya's Past: An Introduction to Historical Method in Africa. Longman, 1981, p. xix
2. Miller, J.C. (ed.) The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History. Wm Dawson & Sons Ltd., 1980, pl.
3. B.A. Ogot, History of Southern Luo. Vol. I. Migration and Settlement 1500-1900. E.A.P.H. Nairobi, 1967. Ogot employed groups of clan experts mainly.
4. G.S. Were, A History of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya C 1500-1930. E.A.P.H. Nairobi, 1976. At times Were used individuals of groups of two or three persons as what he calls "informal and confidential" method but he mostly used large sub-tribe or clan gatherings.
5. G. Muriuki, A History of the Kikuyu 1500-1900 Nairobi, 1974
H.S.K. Mwaniki, Embu Historical Texts E.A.L.B. 1974. The method used here tapped material for "A political History of the Embu CAD 1500-1906". Unpublished M.A. dissertation, University of Nairobi, 1973. The same method has worked well for an on going project entitled "Historical Texts of Eastern Mt. Kenya Peoples" besides other works.
6. J. Vansina, "Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa", Daedalus Vol. 100 (1971), Now edited by F. Gilbert and S.R. Grenbards, Historical Studies Today, (W.W. Norton and Company Inci: New York, 1972), P. 44. The emphasis is mine.