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A CASE FOR ORAL TRADITION AS A SOURCE OF  
HISTORICAL MATERIAL IN KENYA

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In this paper oral tradition should be taken  
as:

The process of handing down information, opinions, beliefs and customs by word of mouth or by example: transmission of knowledge and institutions through successive generations without written instructions<sup>1</sup>.

The paper is not dealing with the academic debates of the 1950s and early 1970s on whether oral tradition is history, contains history, is useful as a source of historical knowledge or should ever be used at all by historians. The debates closed with a conclusion that accepted oral tradition as one of the main sources of historical information that is indispensable in the reconstruction of the past. The other unwritten sources include archaeology, historical linguistics, ethnology, social anthropology, artistic creations and botany. Oral tradition is doubtlessly the most important and richest single source. The paper deals with oral tradition as a source of historical knowledge for the reconstruction of the unwritten historical past mainly in a cephalous societies. It dwells on what the oral tradition involves and how it is exploited to yield the required information. It concludes with the writer's suggestions, which, if adopted, would maximise the benefits of oral tradition.

PROBLEMS

Oral tradition has been avoided as a research tool due to its many problems. Among the outspoken problems are distortions either due to failure of memory or intentional and the lack of absolute chronology.

"Distortions" have scared some scholars and driven them to the verge of desperation as exemplified

by Fadiman who, working among the Meru of Mt. Kenya recorded that due to, "distortions of human imagination, individualism and **fritty**....oral history, then, is not so much a record of the past, as a beacon suggesting its existence".<sup>2</sup> Fadiman did not offer a suggestion as to how one can get the actual history. This ~~writer~~ believes that conclusion/like the above /s are a result of non-thorough work and agrees with Vansina that:

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 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<sup>3</sup>.

In other words, with thorough, painstaking work and an attempt to understand the "distortions" and the motives behind them, one is able to get reasonably accurate material. So this is not an unsumountable huddle.

It is accepted that chronology is of great importance to any history. Indeed, its importance was underscored by Bloch when he termed chronology as, "the very plasma in which events are immersed, and the field within which they become intelligible".<sup>4</sup> Deschamps saw chronology as, "the backbone of history" but sounded a pessimistic note. "Often", he wrote,

it proves to be as unreliable as the directions indicated. Time and space flee the historian, who loses his way in a universe of clouds. Every clan, every lineage, every family even, has its own traditions and contradicts that of its neighbours. Sometimes the same group holds two different traditions without being disturbed by it<sup>5</sup>.

The above pessimism results from pre.conclusion that a society is necessarily homogenous or has one "Adam" and one

"Eve" and hence all their traditions should be in agreement. Research has proved this a fallacy. A researcher should be open-minded and take what the informants give critically then conclude from the evidence. To genuine scholars, the above diverse and contradictory traditions should be a fertile field for more work and varied healthy interpretations rather than disillusionment.

It is admitted that in societies where dates were unrecorded in writing, "the construction of a chronology is a large methodological problem in its own right"<sup>6</sup>. Although this is an accepted and genuine problem, genuine scholars have re-constructed reasonably accurate chronologies through the use of kinglists and 'commoner' genealogies in centralised societies. For "stateless" societies, genealogies, generation or initiation sets have been used. These have been checked against remote available recorded dates or/and natural phenomena like earthquakes and eclipses.

Perhaps it is necessary to pause for a moment here and cast a glance at one aspect of our uncritically accepted source of historical information, the archival material. This gives a gauge of comparing the recorded and oral materials and, perhaps, helps to urge that much oral material should be recorded and used since it compares favourably. Some-one is tempted to say "most" - of the earliest records on Kenyan (and other countries') issues can hardly be accepted as accurate or even fair representatives. Yet, the Kenya National Archive (and other archives) treasure these. Such are, for instance, the traditional institutions observed by the colonial masters on arrival in the first decade of this century. An example is the Njuri Ncheke Council among the Meru of Kenya which even the modern government would like to see back in power for socio-political control. The British

recorded, "Njuri is a secret society. It is essentially pagan. It has traditions of cruelty, murder, intrigue inseparable from any such society".....<sup>7</sup>

After the colonialists disrupted the Meru warriors traditional life, they recorded that these warriors, "Deprived of discipline of war .....were left with no alternative but to dissipate their energies in wine, women and song".<sup>8</sup> Chiefs like Kabandango of Chuka "proved rather incapable being an unfortunate compound of weakness and lack of tact".<sup>9</sup> One was only recorded favourably if he was a stooge or collaborator. And records of the above calibre from all over Kenya take a considerable portion of the Kenya National Archives, copies exist in the overseas world like Britain, the United States of America and Canada. Are we justified in leaving the future scholars and our own future generations at the mercy of the above type of records, supplemented by numerous books and articles and other records. This writer feels that Kenyans - and other genuine scholars - should provide sober records from oral traditions to correct and/or supplement the above.

The above implicitly calls on all scholars within and without institutions of higher learning to try and salvage whatever they can of the Kenya past, as a heritage for the future. To achieve these, many genuine problems will confront the scholar. Such problems will include the permit/research clearance from the authorities concerned, the vernacular languages spoken in the relevant areas, familiarising oneself with the field of research geographically, and socio-culturally. The question of plenty of time required for, apparently, a small amount of material will cause concern just as probable movements on feet to the areas which might not be motorable. Dealing

with, at times, informants who might be elusive, too rigid or verbose can be time consuming and frustrating; especially when one has to interview as many as possible for whatever much or little they know. But all is a necessity which needs time and much patience if one has to be accepted by, and win the confidence of, the informants and the society as a whole.

Among the most difficult problems are expense and interpretation after getting the data. The cost of travel to the field, whether by public transport, cycle or car is often formidable but a necessity. Traditional gifts are necessary whenever one visits an informant. These act as lubricating oil between the interviewer and the interviewee. They are not bribery or even cost of the information since, and here we are lucky in Africa, traditional information is not far sale! it should be noted that some foreign researchers have corrupted some informants by violating the above fundamental principle. Traditional gifts are meant to be tokens of appreciation and good intention on the part of the researcher or visitor. This is why the host or hostess reciprocate by offering as much hospitality - in addition to information as possible.

It is often realised that guides are useful, at times indispensable, especially when the interviewer is in an unfamiliar environment. In this category come research assistants for such tasks as helping in the collecting of data or organising the material. All these add to the expense. Even more expensive are the research equipment. Here are included machines like tape-recorders and tapes/cassettes, camers and films to name only the elementary ones. Processing, in the form of transcribing, translating, typing, and, at times, binding, adds to the expense<sup>10</sup>.

Interpretation crowns the research exercise after obtaining a reasonable amount of data. This is, in many cases, neither an enjoyable nor simple exercise. It can be head cracking or even frustrating. Often one finds himself/herself with a mass of disjointed, inadequate or even conflicting bits and pieces of material. When it comes to myths and legends, one might find them rather romantic, mystic or even incomprehensible. Oral testimonies might sound incredible while either the figurative or archaic languages used add more problems.

This writer cannot provide a ready-made solution to this problem for he has none. What is more, every area and society have their own peculiar problems besides the general ones which cover all mankind. But perhaps some general comments can be of some guidance. The researcher should try and understand the totality of the society concerned, or at least as much as possible depending on given circumstances. The "totality" includes language, culture, politics, economy, psychology and even geography. The researcher should approach the field with a completely open mind, not with pre-conceived ideas. Whatever material is available from an informant or group should as far as possible be checked and cross-checked both with other data from within and the neighbours as well as supplementary sources. The combined data and open-mindedness help in getting a sober interpretation. It should be noted that the most popular view is not necessarily the correct one.

#### WHAT HAS BEEN DONE AND PENDING

Despite all the above and other related problems a considerable amount of work has been done in Kenya and

East Africa in general through oral tradition. This has been the work of both Kenyans and foreign scholars such as Ogot, Osogo, Were, Ochieng', Ayot, Abuso, Mwanzi, Muriuki, Saberwal, Mwaniki, Fadiman and Spear<sup>11</sup>. It is, perhaps, correct to say that over 95% of this work done in Kenya through oral tradition was stimulated by doctoral dissertations. A point to note is that most these works are of the pre-colonial period. Work on colonial through oral tradition has begun with researchers who are mainly interested in biographies such as those of Harry Thuku Tom Mboya and James Beauttah<sup>12</sup>.

From the above, it is obvious that scholars have merely scratched the tip of an iceberg as far as studying Kenya history is concerned for the pre-colonial, colonial and even post-colonial epoches. It should be said, loudly and clearly, that if we shall ever make the much lamented for Kenya National History for the pre-colonial period, we must accept to work on ethnic or so-called "tribal" lines. It is after getting ethnic studies like the above that we shall be able to consolidate them into a national Kenya history. This writer conceives modern Kenya as an amalgam of the many smaller "Nations" termed "tribes" which existed independently before being forged together by the colonial powers early this century. Actually, some, like the Abaluyia and the Meru, of today were each more of "nations" rather than "a nation". Without belabouring the obvious, it should be recorded that there is a lot of work to be done for pre-colonial Kenya as well as colonial and post-colonial. It is true that much has been written for the colonial era but most of it is written from the colonial view point. This brings the African in mainly as an observer - in his own land - or equally often forgets him! It is time that the role of the African in all that happened to make the modern Kenya was spelt out. But then since the African's



archives are in his head, not in anybody's office cabinet, oral tradition should come forward and utilise it. This will give us some type of a social or people's history to supplement the current academic one and hence present a more balanced view than what we currently have.

This line of action becomes even more necessary when it is remembered, as briefly shown above, that our archives and archival material leave a lot to be desired. As shown, most are biased against Africans and African institutions. The archival material is mainly of "annual reports" nature, selective, generalised and much is incomplete or even inaccessible. Yet, except the top policy issues, the contents are better known by living people genuinely and critically, if only a researcher can get the knowledgeable persons. To make the matters worse, these knowledgeable informants are forgetting daily due to lack of stimuli or old age and the interaction with the modern ways of living. Worse still, many are dying of old age! Their deaths do not only rob us of the persons but all their knowledge for ever, without leaving us even a single rare copy for reference. This loss and the need for a more representative history of our land makes the call, to embark and savage as much of what is still left as possible, the more urgent. No time should be lost with polemics, fanfare and ceremony.

Questions as to who should embark on the task, and probably, what the researcher will be looking for might arise in the readers' heads. When and how this should be done might be additional questions. Perhaps brief answers to the above questions might shed some guiding light.

The personnel that can embark on collecting information includes all the interested, the question

of sex set aside. However, the institutions of higher learning, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Culture and Social Services and field administrators rank highest. Institutions like teachers' colleges such as the recently set up Diploma ones and the University should play a leading role in this task. The staff, especially those of the university should be on top of the roll, doing private research projects which should be emulated by others even teachers of secondary schools and colleges. The university staff should also organise their students either as individuals or groups for projects which the same staff should guide and supervise. The staff and students in the departments of history, religious studies, music, African literature and Kiswahili should be able to take the lead.

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology should be highly concerned over the quality and quantity of the material being taught in Kenyan schools. The same ministry should be having an urge to preserve what is available today for improving the quality of future materials. The ministry has personnel both in offices and field who are capable of collecting some data given a conducive atmosphere. Some teachers are top historians, teachers of literature and religious knowledge. These and their students as well as other officers can contribute much. They should be used.

The Ministry of Culture and Social Services needs traditional material for use and preservation, and /both requires field work to retrieve the same. They, supposedly, have at least the basic equipment and the finances<sup>13</sup>. They also should have a sound knowledge of where the traditions exist and how to handle them. Field administrators like District Officers and Chiefs can

contribute greatly. These administrators live with, and among the, informants. If only they developed some interest and spared some time, they would be in excellent shoes for gathering the relevant information. Some colonial administrators, the counterparts of the above, collected much of the material now preserved in the archives and which we depend on to a large extent. Yet, these officers were less learned than their modern counterparts both academically and socio-culturally. Examples of the colonial officers are given by people like C.W. Hobley, H.E. Lambert and even soldiers like colonel Meinertzhagen. Officers working among the warring somali clans or the cattle rustlers by the Turkana, Samburu and Rendile borders with Ethiopia should, besides supervising reconciliation oath taking ceremonies, give us plenty of useful records from the people's oral tradition. African missionaries could also follow the footsteps of their western counterparts in ~~savaging~~ oral traditions.

What nature of information and type of materials should be collected? This writer feels that we should collect whatever we can lay our hands on indiscriminately as long as it is of historical value. The information should range from pre-colonial times, through colonial period to our modern era of post-colonial. Such should include folklore with poetry, songs and dances<sup>14</sup>. Materials on socio-cultural and religious issues such as initiation procedures and rituals, organisations, groupings like clans and councils. Econo-political issues which discuss organisations, executions and the relevant institutions. A few informants will be found with written records in form of diaries, memoirs letters or even memories. Informants who are, for example, ex-soldiers, ex-chiefs, ex-civil

servants, ex-mau mau or freedom fighters, ex-members of parties or peculiar institutions or cults, and squatters have much in one or more of the above form. Other informants will have artifacts or relics either whole or pieces. Such are old or disused tools, implements, household goods, medals, kipande or even monies like the rupee, copper coins with holes, very ancient and out-of-print writings such as books and magazines in vernacular or one of the lingua franca. A collector should try and attain these for preservation and future use. If the informant does not agree to part with the artifact, a photograph of the object would be the next best.

The next question to be answered is when the exercise should be tackled. A simple answer to this is, now. Since there is plenty of material and, presumably, personnel, there should be no time for waiting. If we act quickly, we should be able to tap materials from living persons who are elderly and knowledgeable enough of the past. Indeed, some living elders have lived in the three epoches of Kenyan history; that is the pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial. The majority of informants have lived in, at least, the last two and have some knowledge of the pre-colonial. Others are "eye-witnesses" of some issues or participants in them. As we wait, these custodians of knowledge keep on forgetting what they knew due to modern changes and environment. Others are converted to some religious faiths and social institutions and change from useful informants to hostile ones or none at all. Worse still, diseases and old ages are depriving us of these "human encyclopaedias" through death. Whenever/potential informant dies before the /a knowledge has been tapped, it is tantamount to the irretrievable perishing of a reference work which has no copy.

The last question to be attempted is on how the information is collected. Three main methods could be used. Two involve recording and the third involves carrying away for preservation. In doing all these, the collector is bound to live with, and like, the informants thereby participating in their way of life. This helps the collector to observe and 'feel', experiences which enable reasonable annotating, commenting and conclusion during the final stage of presenting the information. Recordings involve writing or making notes as the informant imparts the knowledge. This is a relatively inexpensive method but can be tedious and slow, giving chances to leaving much useful information. It also psychologically reminds the informant - and audience - that some recording is taking place. The collector might even be suspected for an unpopular government agent such as a tax-collector or a C.I.D. (Criminal Investigation Department) thereby jeopardising the information given. Tape - recording (whether reel-to-reel or cassettes) is the other type of recording. The problems with this method are basically the high expense highlighted above and the time consuming exercise of transcribing-and, as necessary - translating. Otherwise this is the more ideal method. As pointed out above, carrying antifacts or cultural materials depends on the will the informants and owners. To these antifacts or/and their photographs, it should be added that the photographs of key informants, where possible, would be useful.

#### PROCESSING AND UTILISING OF THE FINDINGS

Recorded materials, whether by direct writing or tape-recording should be translated as literally as possible

The researcher could ~~annotate~~ or comment as necessary for clarity and guidance. The material should be re-organised especially to bring about sequence of presentation and consolidating of materials of one sub-topic together because, very often, these might be given in **several** different sections of the talk. As much as possible vernacular versions - or even tapes - should be preserved for cross-checking.

From the above information - or sources of information - the scholar could write articles or papers which could be shared with colleagues. Monographs could also be written. Historical Texts could be **compiled** from the material wherein the information of each informant or group of informants could form one chapter<sup>15</sup>. These could be ~~eyebrowed~~ and shared with other scholars even before publication. Libraries could help in binding the materials and putting some or all into circulation. A considerable amount of material in the long run could be accumulated by the library (archival department) which could act as a stored bank or pool of information if well preserved. There would be no harm in sharing such raw materials with the Kenya National Archives. In fact, it would enrich the latter by putting more and more raw materials for research under the same roof. It should be emphasised that the main importance of this exercise is to acquire knowledge from its custodians for **current** researches and use and for future generations when these custodians will be gone after death.

The ideal treatment of such material should be publishing them. However, it is common knowledge in Kenya that publication of most academic materials, unless they be rather popular, is a difficult task. Scholars might

author manuscripts, publishers hesitate to play their role on economic and commercial considerations. Worse still, when it is African history, most publishers be they local or foreign, hesitate wondering over the marketability of such a book. However, although this writer has no objection over the publication of books compiled from such materials as discussed above, he prefers both the books and historical texts. If only one had to be published or merely written, the historical texts should rank higher. This/because the books are usually /is the authors' interpretations of the available material. They are also rather selective and so leave out much material as irrelevant in the particular topic chosen.

In contrast, the texts are the thoughts of the informants and are indiscriminate in coverage. What might be irrelevant in a certain topic in history would be found relevant for the next, or another, topic. Even better, the texts, it will be observed, are multi-purpose in that they will have several subjects in one chapter. For instance, one could find materials relevant to law, landownership, sociology, religion and many others in the same text. At this stage, it should be emphasised, we need every bit of information, then we can select.

Publishers, especially local, should be persuaded to be more favourable in publishing historic works. This could be done through a demand of works in African history created by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology and the institutions of higher learning. Once this is done, even the general public should come in. The University - of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College - should own a Publishing Unit or Printing Press. One could, actually, say that this is long overdue. It is such a unit that would publish materials from research

findings - not only from history but all arts and sciences - and circulate them. This would create incentives in scholars to do researches as well as educate within and without the university campus. It is obvious that the academic works which the commercial publishers regard as unmarketable to the general public in Kenya (and elsewhere) would find its cordial home within the University Publisher. In the absence of sophisticated university Publishing system funds should be made available for processing and circulating monographs and other research findings. If such material was circulated to contemporary institutions, it is hoped that a form of exchange with these would arise - or be strengthened if it exists on a small scale - putting our institution in the picture of what happens elsewhere. This in itself would be both encouraging and educative.

#### SUMMARY/CONCLUSION

This brief paper has attempted to show that oral tradition is an accepted and important source of historical information. It has also highlighted the problems of the discipline and also indicated that they are not unsurmountable or even extremely peculiar. It has also been pointed out that comparatively little has been done and much more remains to be done. Briefly discussed also were questions as to who should engage in this task, what, when and how it should be done. Suggestions on processing, publishing and circulating the results have been offered. All the above climax to an urgent call to embarking on the collection an salvaging what is available since a considerable amount has been lost while those who should have taken action argued or hesitated on the validity of oral traditions, forcing some to shy away while others still were not sure of what needed be done. It should be noted that the above



is but a broad guide, it is difficult to give a precise or dogmatic prescription because different situations demand different approaches although the material might be the same. Finally, it is, perhaps, important to emphasise that we are running short of time and so should embark on the task immediately, with all the concerned playing their respective roles.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Merriam, G & C. Company, Websters' Third New International Dictionary. (London, 1976 edition)
2. Fadiman, J.A. "Traditional Warfare Among the Meru of Mt. Kenya." (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1973), P.3.
3. Vansina, J. "Once Upon a Time : Oral Traditions as History in Africa", Daedalus, Vol.100 (1971). Now edited by F. Gilbert and S.R. Greubards, Historical Studies Today. (W.W. Norton & Company Inc. : New York, 1972), P. 44. my emphasis.
4. Bloch, M. The Historian's Craft (Manchester, 1954), pp. 27-28.
5. Quoted in J. Vansina, R. Mauny and L. Thomas (eds.) The Historian in Tropical Africa. (London, 1964), Footnote 1.
6. Cohen, D.W. "A Survey of Interlacustrine Chronology" in Journal of African History, Vol. XI, No.2 (1970), P. 177.

7. Kenya National Archives, Nairobi (here after, KNA),  
DC/MRU/4/5(14/5/1955 ?)
8. K.N.A. Ibid.
9. K.N.A. FC/CP/1/6/1, Political Record Book, Chuka  
Sub-district : 1907 - 1918, P.37.
10. It is the view of this writer that expense is the most difficult problem of all because whereas for the others one can devote and sacrifice to achieve success, it is impracticable to sacrifice money that one does not have. Yet, to finance a research in a medium sized district/ society for about six months with only elementary equipment and assistants, about KSh.42,000= is required. This is only for collecting and initial processing and so excludes publishing.
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12. Thuku H. An Antobiography. (Nairobi, 1970) Though Thuku wrote his there was participation by other oral informants.
- Goldsworthy, D. Tom Mboya : The Man Kenya Wanted to Forget. (Heinemann : Nairobi, 1982).
- Spencer, J. James Beauttah : Freedom Fighter. (Stellascop Publishing Company : Nairobi, 1983).
13. The writer remembers meeting some two officers of this ministry in Baluyia in late 1980 busy collecting some oral traditions. It is wished that the practice continued.
14. For Classical genres of traditions, see Vansina, J. Oral Tradition : A Study in Historical Methodology (Translated by H.M. Wright). (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965) pp. 142-164.

15. There are only three published Historical Texts in Kenya known to this writer. These are: Were, G.S. Western Kenya Historical Texts. (East African Literature Bureau : Nairobi, 1967). Mvaniki, H.S.K. Embu Historical Texts. (Kenya Literature Bureau : Nairobi, 1974). Ayot, H.O. Historical Texts of the Lake Region of East Africa. (Kenya Literature Bureau : Nairobi, 1977).

SOME OTHER WORKS RELEVANT TO OUR TOPIC

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