

ORAL TRADITIONS AND THE STUDY OF EARLY SETTLEMENTS IN THE KATSINA ALA BASIN, NIGERIA

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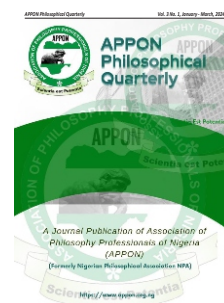
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Abstract

The paper aims at demonstrating the relevance of oral tradition to the study of the archaeology and history of African societies. It focuses on the study of the history of origins and migrations of the Shitire, a Tiv group in the Katsina Ala Basin, Benue Valley of Nigeria. The migratory history of two lineage families of the Shitire was studied through oral interviews at Shikaan, north east of Katsina Ala town. On the basis of genealogical calculations, it was established that the Shitire, and perhaps other Tiv groups, inhabited the Benue valley around the 15th century. This paper asserts the importance of oral tradition to the study of human history and debunks the erroneous views against the viability of oral traditions in archaeological and historical reconstruction.

Key words: Shitire, Archaeology, Settlement history and Oral tradition.

Introduction

The importance of oral tradition in archaeological and historical reconstruction has been demonstrated by scholars such as Afigbo¹, Alagoa², Erim³, Effah-Gyamfi⁴ and Orkar⁵. These scholars have also agreed with Vansina⁶ that oral traditions are testimonies of the past which are distinct from rumours and are transmitted in a society from mouth to mouth and generation

to generation. Vansina also stresses the importance of oral traditions in societies without written records. He further argues that even where there are written records, many historical sources, including the most ancient ones are based on oral traditions.

While it cannot be doubted that oral traditions are vital to the study of African archaeology and history, some European scholars like Trevor-Roper⁷ hold contrary

¹ A.E. Afigbo, "Oral traditions and history in eastern Nigeria." *African Notes*, Vol 13, No 3, (1966), 12-20.

² E.J. Alagoa, "Oral traditions among the Ijo of the Niger Delta." *Journal of African History*, VII, 3, (1966), 405-419.

³ O. Idoma Erim, *Nationality 1600-1900: Problems of Studying the Origin And Development Of Ethnicity*. (Enugu, Fourth Dimension Publishing Co. Ltd, 1981)

⁴ Gyamfi, K. Effah, "Some archaeological reflections on Akan traditions of Origin." *West African Journal of Archaeology*, 9 (1979), 187-199.

⁵ J.N. Orkar, *A Precolonial History Of The Tiv*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of Dalhousie, (Canada: 1979).

⁶ J. Vansina, *Oral Traditions as History* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985)

⁷ H. Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe." *The Listener* 70, 1809. (1963), 871-875

opinions. According to Gundu⁸, African societies and non-western cultures have been labelled primitives in European historiography for having no written records considered to be a more reliable source for archaeological and historical reconstruction. For instance, oral traditions and activities of Tiv cultural behaviours documented by European travellers, colonial administrators, missionaries and anthropologists were not considered as history because of the absence of the knowledge of writing among the Tiv.

Documented oral traditions as history

The histories of most African societies are derived from oral traditions, however as mentioned earlier, the use of oral traditions for historical reconstruction has over the years been ignored by some Western scholars (Akiga,⁹ Bohannan,¹⁰ Bohannan and Bohannan,¹¹ and Shaw¹²). Such scholars have at different times denied or distorted the past of societies without written records by attaching more relevance to the written word than other sources of history like oral traditions, ethnography, linguistics and genetics, among others. For instance, Trevor Roper,¹³ a European scholar and Professor of history from Oxford argues that Africa has no history and that the history of Africa is merely the history of European colonial activities on the African Continent. G.W.F. Hegel, a philosopher and European Scholar from Germany also argues that Africa is not a historical part of the world because it has no movement or development to exhibit.¹⁴

The first documented study on the oral

history of the Tiv by Akiga, an Evangelist with the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM), was not regarded as history. Akiga's work on the Tiv included among several other things, the history of origin and migrations, Tiv traditional institutions and belief systems and aspects of colonial administration. Akiga considers his work as the history of the Tiv when he made the following statement:

....it has been my constant prayer that God would help me to write this book, in order that the new generation of Tiv, which is beginning to learn this New Knowledge should know the things of their fathers as well as those of the present generation. For everything that belongs to Tiv are passing away, and the old people who should tell us about these things, will soon be dead. It makes me sad to think that our heritage is being lost and that there will be none to remember it¹⁵

Akiga who was an eye witness to the changing nature of Tiv society due to contacts with the Europeans was concerned with the preservation of the history and culture of the Tiv people. Though a convert of the Christian religion, he felt that different aspects of Tiv cultural heritage that were eroding into oblivion due to the influence of Christianity and European culture should be documented for posterity. At the completion of his work he maintains that:

This book fulfils a father's duty to all Tiv who have a care for that which concerns their own tribe. You then my Tiv brothers of the new generation that can read, read it and tell others,

⁸ Gundu, ZA. *Historical Archaeology of Ancient Settlements in South-Eastern Tivland, Benue State*. PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan, 1999.

⁹ B. Akiga. *Akiga's Story*, translated by Rupert East, (London: 1939).

¹⁰ L. A. Bohannan, "Genealogical Charter." *Africa*, Vol. 22, (1952), 301-315.

¹¹ P. Bohannan, and L. Bohannan, *The Tiv of Central Nigeria*. (London: Stone and Cox Ltd, 1953).

¹² T. Shaw, *Why 'Darkest' Africa? Archaeological Light on an Old Problem*. (1975).

¹³ H. Trevor-Roper, "The Rise of Christian Europe." *The Listener* 70, 1809 (1963), 871-875

¹⁴ B.W. Andah, and A.I. Okpoko, "Oral Traditions and West African Culture History: New Direction." *West African Journal of Archaeology*, Vol.9, (1979), 201-224

¹⁵ B. Akiga, *Akiga's Story*, translated by Rupert East, (1939), 2.

who cannot, of the things of our ancestors; so that whether we have learnt to read or not, we all may still know something of our fathers who have gone before us. ...¹⁶

In spite of the above statement that expresses Akiga's patriotism and zeal for writing the history of his people, Rupert East who annotated and translated his work did not refer to it as the 'History of the Tiv' but as 'Akiga's Story' mainly because it was derived from oral sources. East argues that:

Akiga set out to write a History of the Tiv. He has not succeeded in this, because the Tiv, like most African tribes, have no history in our sense of the word. But he has given an account, from the native point of view, and of the events of recent years, and particularly of effects of contact with European culture.¹⁷

Contrary to the view of East, Orkar¹⁸ describes Akiga's work as a research of outstanding merit that has remained a major source book for modern historians, sociologists, archaeologists, anthropologists and other related disciplines in the humanities. He further argues that the work is path-breaking as those of Johnson among the Yoruba in Nigeria and Kagwa and Nyakatura among the Baganda and Bunyoro respectively in East Africa. It is baffling those colonial administrators, anthropologists and several other European scholars like Bohannan and Bohannan¹⁹ who

relied heavily on Akiga's work to study the Tiv society also doubted its historical value because it was derived from oral sources.

The above notwithstanding, oral traditions have unravelled the past of different African societies. For instance, the study of the oral history of the Akan people of Ghana by Effah-Gyamfi²⁰ has demonstrated a historical link between contemporary Akan peoples and archaeological materials. Pikirayi's²¹ work on the history and archaeology of Zimbabwe has also established a link between the prehistoric and historical periods of some Zimbabwean Societies such as Mutapa. Schmidt²² also stresses the importance of oral traditions in the study of the Iron Age of the Buhaya people of East Africa and argues that non-literary historiographical forms such as oral traditions are vital in the reconstruction of African history.

Smith and Wobst²³ also asserted the relevance of oral sources when they maintained that indigenous voices and representation are vital in archaeological and historical interpretations. Barnardini²⁴ has also given a clue as to how contemporary Native Americans have been promoting the legacies of their ancestors through oral history. Research by Ndera and Danburi²⁵ among the Shikaan people of Shitire has also demonstrated the importance of oral traditions in the location of archaeological sites and interpretation of

¹⁶ B. Akiga, *Akiga's Story*, translated by Rupert East, (1939), 4.

¹⁷ B. Akiga, *Akiga's Story*, translated by Rupert East, (1939), 6.

¹⁸ J. N. Orkar, *A Precolonial History of The Tiv*, PhD Thesis (Canada: University of Dalhousie, 1979).

¹⁹ P. Bohannan, and L. Bohannan, *The Tiv of Central Nigeria*, (1953).

²⁰ K. Effah-Gyamfi, "Some archaeological reflections on Akan Traditions of Origin." *West African Journal of Archaeology*, 9, (1979), 187-199.

²¹ I. Pikirayi, "Research Trends in the Historical Archaeology of Zimbabwe." *Historical Archaeology: One World Archaeology*, 31, (1999), 67-84.

²² P. R. Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology: A Structural Approach in African Culture* (London, Greenwood Press, 1978).

²³ C. Smith, and H. M. Wobst, "Decolonising Archaeological Theory and Practice." *Indigenous Archaeologies: Decolonizing theory and Practice: One World Archaeology*, 47, (1998), 6-13.

²⁴ W. Barnardini, *Hopi Oral Tradition and the Archaeology of Identity*. (Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2005).

²⁵ J. D. Ndera, and A. N. Danburi, "Report of Archaeological Research at Shikaan, Katsina Ala Basin." *Journal of Nigerian Field Archaeology*, 1, no.1, (2011), 66-76.

finds and features. The relevance of oral traditions in archaeological and historical reconstruction is clearly overwhelming; however, one must critically evaluate all oral sources before incorporating them into archaeological and historical accounts.

Oral history of the Shitire Research work on the oral history of the Shitire was mainly carried out at Shikaan village in Mbagen-Shitire of the Katsina Ala Basin. Oral historians were carefully selected on the basis of age and their knowledge of the history of the Shitire and other Tiv groups. The Shitire people consider *Swem* as the oldest ancestral settlement of the Tiv from where they migrated to Ibinda in the present area occupied by the Tiv group of Ikurav-Ya. The *Shitire* started their migration to their present abode from *Ibinda* about the 15th century AD in the company of the *Ugondo*, another Tiv clan. Both groups advanced towards the east of river Katsina Ala and subsequently crossed at the upper end of Gugur (*ityough-ki-Gugur*), a rocky place along the river and settled at *Akovur* referred to in Makar²⁶ as *Mkovur* hill where they later moved and settled on *Dikpo* hill. The *Ugondo* and *Shitire* later disputed at *Dikpo* hill over who was the original owner of the settlement. However, this was amicably resolved in favour of the *Shitire* and the *Ugondo* left to *Mtom* hill from where they proceeded to settle at *Mdema* hills in present day Taraba State. Some oral historians in *Shitire* have maintained that the *Ugondo* went back to settle at *Kovur* hill after they lost *Dikpo* hill to *Shitire* before leaving for *Mdema* hills while others have argued that the *Ugondo* inhabited another hill about 2 km east of *Dikpo* hill known as *Wo-Ikyuga* before migrating to *Mdema* hill. One does not know who is correct among the informants but what is obvious is that the *Ugondo* migrated to *Mdema* hill in present

day Taraba State when they could not secure *Dikpo* hill for habitation.

The *Ugondo* had some problems at *Mdema* as they were severely defeated by the Chamba (*Ughenyi*) in a fierce battle that made them to evacuate in disorder leaving most of their valuables. The Chamba pursued the *Ugondo* to *Dikpo* hill where the combined forces of *Gambe* (a part of *Shitire*) and *Ugondo* successfully defeated the Chamba invaders. After the war, *Ugondo* left the *Shitire* and crossed river Katsina Ala to join other Tiv groups again. It was during this time that other sections of *Gambe* accompanied the *Ugondo* apparently because of the fear of the volatile situation in the area. This accounts for the separation and existence of different parts of *Shitire* in two different geographical areas in Tivland today. The *Gambe* group that opted to stay in the Katsina Ala area is known as *Gambe-ya* while the one that left with the *Ugondo* is referred to as *Gambe-tiev*. It's only the *Gambe-ya* and *Kpav* groups of *Shitire* that occupy the Katsina area today with a section of the *Gambe-ya* also occupying present day Taraba State. The *Gambe-Tiev* inhabits Logo Local government of Benue State and Wukari Local government of Taraba State. All *Shitire* groups are believed to have inhabited *Dikpo* hill located about two kilometres west of Shikaan village in the Katsina Ala area before they became separated (Ndera).²⁷

Dating oral history through Genealogical Calculations

It can be noticed from the above that oral historians did not tie their narratives to specific dates for one to understand the time frame within which the *Shitire* people occupied or settled in the Benue valley. Therefore, genealogical calculations were carried out from Burakinde and Amojuku,

²⁶ T. Makar, *A History of Political Change among the Tiv In The 19th and 20th Centuries*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Ltd, 1994).

²⁷ J. D. Ndera, "Ethnographic Survey of Settlement Patterns among the Shitire of Katsina Ala." *Journal of Humanities*, Bayero University Kano, (2002), 120 -130

the two major lineage groups in Shikaan village to have an idea about the early history of the Shitire in the Benue Valley. Many oral historians were interviewed from both lineages but only the genealogical lines of Sue Ande²⁸ from Burakinde and Nyityo Girgir²⁹ from Amojuku were sampled because of their immense knowledge of the history of their family lines.

Burakinde Group:

Sue- Ande- Shikaan- Atov- Akenawe- Ikyoti- Agena- Nyikyaa- Nder- Kpav- Shitire- Ipusu- Akem and Tiv.

Amojuku Group:

Nyityo- Girgir- Numbeve- Kule- Hyev- Akenawe- Ikyoti- Agena- Nyikyaa- Dumbu- Kpav- Shitire- Ipusu- Akem and Tiv.

Both Sue and Igirgi independently argued that marriages were usually delayed because of the exchange marriage system that was practiced by the Tiv. The Tiv practiced different marriage systems but exchange marriage, locally referred to as *yamshe*, was the most cherished. This marriage system was practised by the Tiv until 1927 when the British abolished it. By this system, a person could give his daughter or sister as wife to another man and also take the daughter or sister of the said man as wife for himself, his son or brother. The exchange marriage system was cherished above all other forms of marriages in Tiv society and women who married through this system were held in high esteem because of the value attached to it by the society. It was a common belief that women married through exchange marriages were true representatives of the husband's sister.

Oral historians from Burakinde and Amojuku also maintained that marriages were delayed in most families mainly because the younger members of the society

were compelled to remain bachelors until comparatively late in life. At times in a family of seven males and one female, the most elderly male would exchange the female for a wife. The rest of his brothers would wait for him to produce female children that could be exchanged for wives. Since no member of any family had the capacity to influence the sex of a child before birth, the desire to have enough female children to exchange for wives was not always fulfilled. Given these intricacies, it was argued from both family groups that the average marrying period for most bachelors was between 35 and 40 years. It was also argued that women were not part of the genealogical line because they were always married out to other families where they produce children for a different genealogy. For instance, in a family of ten in which the first nine were female, only the tenth child who is a male would be part of the family genealogy as the rest of the nine would be married out. The genealogical charter of both groups was calculated on the assumption that at the age of 35 years, the ancestors of both Sue Ande and Nyityo Igirgi had a male that was part of the genealogy. Therefore, by multiplying the average marrying age of 35 years with 13 ancestors of Ande and 14 ancestors of Nyityo, 455 and 490 years were arrived at respectively. Notwithstanding the possibility of earlier dates due to the exemption of female children in the genealogical line, this research establishes from oral sources that by the 15th century, the Shitire had inhabited the Benue Valley region of Nigeria.

Conclusion

This work has reaffirmed the views of various scholars, including Jan Vasina³⁰ and Schmidt³¹ on the usefulness of oral

²⁸ Oral Historian from Burakinde Lineage, Shikaan-Shitire

²⁹ Oral Historian from Amojuku Lineage, Shikaan-Shitire

³⁰ J. Vasina, *Oral Traditions*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

³¹ P. R. Schmidt, *Historical Archaeology: A Structural Approach in African Culture*. (London: Greenwood Press, 1978).

traditions in reconstructing the past of societies with or without written records. Oral traditions in Shikaan have identified the settlement sites that were occupied by the Shitire during their migrations in the Benue Valley. This study has also established that the Shitire people inhabited the Benue Valley in the 15th century in line with archaeological dates from early Tiv settlements at Tse Dura (*Indyer Mbakuuv*) and Akoo hills that were studied by Folorunso³² and Gundu³³ respectively. Archaeological dates from two rock shelters at Tse-Dura hill have suggested that the Tiv might have either migrated into the Benue Valley around the 15th century or inhabited the Benue Valley long before the 15th century. Folorunso who favours two waves of migration for the Tiv argues that a Late Stone Age date for a Tiv-related group in one of the rock shelters at Tse Dura hill may account for the first wave of migration while the second wave of migration might have taken place in the 15th century from the Cameroonian highlands. The archaeological dates from Tse Dura hill have wider implications for Dikpo hilltop settlement that was once inhabited by all the Shitire groups. Dikpo hilltop settlement is known from oral sources to have been established within the same period with those of Tse-Dura and Ushongo. These settlements are known to have been established following the wave of migration of various Tiv groups into the Benue plains from Binda hill on the Nigerian-Cameroonian border. Genealogical calculations derived from the oral history of the family groups of the Shitire in Shikaan points to the 15th century as the period the Shitire occupied the Benue Valley. Therefore, if Folorunso is right, one may argue that Dikpo settlement sites resulted from the second wave of migrations and the

sites of Tse Dura and Ushongo might have been re-occupied by the Tiv in the 15th century AD. The oral histories from the Shitire and the arguments by Folorunso have established a meeting point between the history and archaeology of early Tiv settlements in the Benue Valley.

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³² C.A. Folorunso, *Interrogating the Evidence: The Nigerian Cultural Landscape*. An Inaugural Lecture, University of Ibadan, 2007).

³³ Z. A. Gundu, *Historical Archaeology of Ancient Settlements in South-Eastern Tivland, Benue State* PhD Thesis, University of Ibadan (1999) .

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