

# Significance of Oral Traditions to Ethiopian Studies

*Asnaqe Wubete*

## 1. Introduction

The objective of this text is to discuss the importance of Oral Traditions for Historical Studies with special emphasis on Ethiopian History, and the necessity of giving due attention to the study of Oral Traditions to reconstruct the past.

One of the most widely agreed shortcomings in Ethiopian history is the lack of comprehensiveness, with very little or no space to the diverse elements of population who make up the nation state. This problem is linked with issues like absence of regional studies, an exclusive focus on political issues and nationalist historicist themes only (ignoring important entities that make up history, like economic history, cultural history, and social history). Of course this partly emanates from the contents of the available written sources which focus only on political matters revolving mainly around the imperial circles. But the attempt to write Ethiopian history based on such sources only has given rise to a psychological understanding - as if history means only what the kings and heads of states did. Most texts dealing with Ethiopian history do not include the life of the different peoples in the different regions apart from political activities and the people's reaction to political matters or what the rulers did to the people.

In addition, regarding political affairs the historiography of events focuses mainly on the northern half of the country. Still one of the major problems regarding this focus is due to the presence of written documents on focusing on the north, while documentation of history in written form is widely absent in the southern part of the country. As in many African countries the practice of representing past events in symbolic form or alphabets in the south is almost nil. In short there is no practice of writing, although this does not necessarily mean that the society in particular and the region in general has no history. Even in the north, due to the Ge'ez alphabets, different documents of different nature are available to a certain extent. However, the presence of writing culture and alphabets has not necessarily assured the preservation of history as such. But at least there is something to rely on for the historical writer, by trying to overcome the different biases and problems associated even with the written document of different origins. Even

available documents had faced innumerable destructions in consequence to the long wars during the medieval and later periods of Ethiopian history.

On the other hand, there was no practice and sufficient tendency or conviction by past governments in the north to document activities and issues in written form. Hence, it implies a much minimized utilization of the legacy of alphabets and written culture in this part of the country. In most instances, messages even from the imperial court were disseminated orally through the use of the '*negarit*' as a mechanism and as a sign to show the messages coming from the emperors and the kings. The overall implication of the preceding statement is that oral transmissions played an immensely important role in places where there was practice of writing also.

Usually, as people have their own respectable history, any illiterate society in any part of Ethiopia and any other part of the globe may have a mechanism of preserving their history through cultural mechanisms called Oral Tradition.

If we agree that, let alone a society or community comprising its own administrative and other complex cultural institutions, even a single individual has his/her own history of merit, although, no one is there to record it. Then we can not deny any people of having their own history of significance. This leads us to the necessity of raising a mechanism of exploiting available evidences for the study of the history of a pre-literate society which mainly takes the form of Oral Tradition and at times through remnants of material evidences, i.e., archaeological evidences.

Coming back to the problem of comprehensiveness of Ethiopian history, partly the solution can be provided through a full commitment and dedicated study of Oral Traditions in all parts of the country, probably with fairly tending towards the south as the problem has a greater tone in this part. But one has to understand that I don't mean I'm going to give a once and for all solution to the problem, rather my intention is to draw the necessary emphasis or trust that Oral Tradition should receive in this regard. Even more, the idea of tending towards Oral Tradition for the study of Ethiopian history is not some thing that has never been raised. It has been suggested by many giant historians and some attempts are made to record traditions like the one carried out in the 1970s in the Jimma area through the supervision of Addis Ababa University.<sup>1</sup> In spite of all, I feel that the least attention is given to such a study and there is a psychological tendency to really underestimate traditions' significance for the study of our past.

## 2. Definitions

Jan Vansina defines Oral Traditions as verbal messages which are reported from the past beyond the present generation. The message must be oral statements

1 Bahiru Zewde (Comp.), *A Short History of Ethiopia*, Addis Ababa University Press, Addis Ababa, p. 79.

spoken, sung, or called out on musical instruments only. This differentiates Oral Traditions from written messages and all other sources except oral history.<sup>2</sup> The same author in another work states that Oral Traditions consist of all kinds of verbal testimonies forming a chain of testimonies of the past. The reason for designating tradition as a chain of testimonies refers to its characteristics, i.e., the transmission by word of mouth.<sup>3</sup> Both definitions emphasize on aspects of Oral Traditions as messages from the past. But the messages might take different forms which could be in the form of speech, song, reserved through the help of musical instruments of respective cultures. Not all oral sources are Oral Traditions because this might confuse traditions with oral history. Traditions are considered as a 'genre of source' and oral history as an activity. In order to understand their difference it is important to look at a definition of oral history, which refers to the study of the recent past by means of life histories or personal recollections, where informants speak about their own experiences.

The above definitions focus more on the relation of traditions with history, in the following definition a generic form of expression is implied. "In the vast system of forms and modes of communication denominated by the syntax 'oral' tradition, which congregates knowledge, memories, values, and symbols generally configured in linguistic objects of non-literary or aesthetic-literary nature, objects with or without consignment in written testimonies, accomplished vocally and recognizable collectively and during consecutive generations in an anatomy built by the laws of traditionality (anonymity, persistence, variation). Such a definition not only emphasizes vocal nature of traditions but also looks at connections with traditions of owners of the narratives and such connections could be revealed with contradictions and similarity of one testimony with the other, different versions of the same tradition and continuation from generation to generation."<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Common Characteristics of Oral Traditions

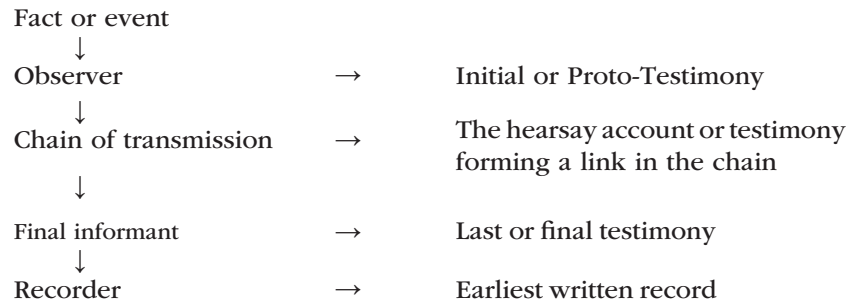
It is important to briefly look at the characteristics of Oral Traditions as described by Vansina. An observer passes on whatever he came across in a testimony which might be called the 'initial or proto-testimony'. This testimony is taken over by any one who repeats it to a second person, who in turn passes on the information by telling it to a third person, etc. "Thus a chain of transmission comes into being, in which each successive informant forms a link and in which every testimony is a hearsay account. The final informant communicates the final testimony in

2 Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Chicago: Aldine, 1965, p. 27-28.

3 Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Chicago: Aldine, 1965, p. 19.

4 Nogueira, Carlos "Oral Tradition: A Definition" *Oral Tradition* - Volume 18, Number 2, October 2003, p. 164-165.

the chain to someone who records it in writing.”<sup>5</sup> This sequence can be shown diagrammatically as follows:



Both the above diagrammatic sequence<sup>6</sup> and definition of Oral Tradition show that transmission by word of mouth is the distinctive feature of traditions. The implication of this is that a tradition must be considered or taken as historical documents, even if the documents are verbal ones.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. Necessity to Research Oral Traditions

There is no doubt that Oral Traditions are of real value to historical study, but a degree of suspicion should be applied unless they are substantiated by other historical sources.<sup>8</sup> Meyerowitz, as mentioned by Vansina, asserts that ‘traditions can not so well preserved in some places as in others’ which, I feel, also be observed in Ethiopia. This is because, it is hardly possible to cite a sufficiently encompassing work done on preservation of Oral Traditions through a systematic way by historians for academic consumption.<sup>9</sup>

Past discussions, concerning the issue of Oral Traditions, be it within historical or ethnographical researches, showed that the usefulness of Oral Tradition as historical evidence is a puzzle that has to be addressed. Nevertheless, there is the crucial question: ‘None of them provides a general discussion on the special nature of Oral Traditions as a source of information about the past or, nor attempts to apply the methods of historical criticism to these sources’.<sup>10</sup> In this regard the one who expressed the preceding idea, Jan Vansina, has dealt in depth to solve these

5 Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Chicago: Aldine, 1965, p. 8.

6 Adopted as it is from Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p. 8.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid*, p. 18.

two problems in his books, *Oral Tradition*, and *Oral Tradition as History*, which are really works of superb significance, I feel, for anybody interested to work with Oral Tradition. His pieces of work as well as many others on Oral Tradition that there is no question on the value of oral traditions but one needs only to be cautious in utilizing them.

Jan Vansina refers to Bauer who has classified Oral Traditions into two. One of the groups comprises all sources - regardless of whether they have survived intact or have become distorted in the process of transmission - which can be traced back to a particular person and which has been handed down for some definite purpose, either public or private. To the second group belong those sources for which no personal authorship can be discovered, and which have spread more or less of their own accord. This is the group to which rumours, myths, sagas, legends, anecdotes, proverbs, and folk-songs must be allocated. In dealing with sources of such type, it is necessary to establish whether they have been composed or invented for the sake of propaganda or with some autobiographical aim in view.<sup>11</sup>

All such oral traditions share the same behaviour of being transmitted spontaneously from one to another, and along the way the original form is lost and the content becomes fluctuating and blurred. Even rumour may be useful as a historical source in case it can be corroborated by other sources. With narratives, legends, and anecdotes, the mode of transmission must be examined, and they must be rejected if they contain internal contradictions or give accounts of events which are not in accord with facts otherwise established. With regard to the narratives of classical antiquity, linguistic or archaeological evidence may be a determinative factor in evaluating their factual accuracy. Historical legends are always propagandist in intention, and moreover suffer from distortions of the original version owing to the omission of allusions which no longer have any meaning or which are simply not understood. Proverbs express moral attitudes and likewise arose a moral response. But general information transmitted orally can be treated in the same way as written sources.<sup>12</sup>

This summary of the views asserted by Bauer and many other writers considered by Vansina is exclusively based on European Oral Traditions and on traditions which have come back from classical times. Of course it is appropriate because they have no genuine sources at their disposal, particularly with respect to Oral Tradition proper, which is still to be found today in pre-literate societies. There are drawbacks associated with using traditional material existing in written forms. It is also necessary to take into account that all existing traditions in Europe are traditions which have been preserved in a society that uses writing for recording all the events of the past that have a more than anecdotal interest.<sup>13</sup>

In consequence, Oral Tradition in such societies is limited to the exchanges that take place in the course of everyday conversation, and comprises traditions which

11 *Ibid*, p. 5.

12 *Ibid*, p. 5-6.

13 *Ibid*, p. 6.

are handed down from generation to generation in a random fashion, with out the aid of any special techniques. Above all, they all are at the service of aesthetic, moral or didactic purposes. Contrarily, these are not functions shared by all types of Oral Tradition.<sup>14</sup>

Both the conclusions of writers like Bauer, and the rules formulated by them cannot be regarded as universally valid, as they are based on sources of inferior quality. Besides, their propositions can easily be challenged when confronted with the traditions of non-literate peoples, where Oral Tradition is at its best.<sup>15</sup>

For many years also Oral Tradition is being used by professional historians like R. Oliver and others in addition to what has been used by many amateurs.<sup>16</sup> But one cannot ignore the necessity of utilizing Oral Tradition with the support of other methods and sources. These are: Trying to establish relations with the social and political structures of the peoples, comparison with the traditions of neighbouring peoples, and link with the chronological indications of genealogies and age-set cycles, of documented contacts with literate people, of dated natural phenomena such as famines and eclipses, and of archaeological findings.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, both amateur historians and current professional historians agree that it is possible to depend on Oral Traditions to some degree and for specific purposes.<sup>18</sup>

When we look at the utilization of Oral Tradition, ethnologists and historians are major users of it, in order to reconstruct the past of the peoples they have studied. Hence, there are groups of ethnologists who assert that it is the historian who should judge the reliability of Oral Traditions. To do so, they suggest, historians have to apply the rules of historical methodology- 'where authoritative historical evidence is available, the investigator must evaluate it in accordance with the canons of the historian. Great care must be exercised in interpreting Oral Traditions historically'.<sup>19</sup>

## 5. Importance of Archaeology in this Context

There are various disciplines which the historian would find ver useful when studying the history of peoples without writing and among sthose archaeology is the prior one.<sup>20</sup>

Archaeology can help us to identify some features of the past, particularly on 'migrations and on material culture.' Due to the limitation of Oral Traditions to survive from a remote past like the Neolithic period, it is hardly possible to

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7-8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>20</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, London: Currey, 1985, p. 173.

connect information obtained from Oral Traditions with concrete archaeological finds of such times. For more recent periods, one can identify connection between traditions and certain material objects of archaeological finds.<sup>21</sup>

Archaeology provide evidences which make it possible to understand proto-historical cultures in comparison with the culture of tribes whose memory is preserved in traditions, and in addition it can provide useful information about migrations and trade, which can be derived from the diffusion of certain techniques, pottery in most instances being the most important. The objects can be dated, and the field of archaeology can go far further back into the past than any other of the disciplines in human sciences. For all these reasons, archaeology is the most useful one of the auxiliary disciplines that the historian of Oral Traditions can make use of.<sup>22</sup>

“Finally, Oral Traditions are historical sources which can provide reliable information about the past if they are used with all the circumspection demanded by the application of historical methodology to any kind of source whatsoever. And here the historian using Oral Traditions finds himself on exactly the same level as historians using any other kind of historical source material. No doubt he/she will arrive at a lower degree of probability than would otherwise be attained, but that does not rule out the fact that what he is doing is valid, and that it is history.” (Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, p. 183, 186).

After addressing on the value of Oral Traditions as source, it is relevant to discuss the extent to which we can rely on Oral Traditions.

In areas or societies where oral information is the means to preserve history and to transfer ideas, there are different mechanisms to assure transmission as good as possible. There are situations by which the transmission of Oral Traditions may hold on to a certain specified set of rules. On the other hand they may also be a totally unplanned affair left completely to chance. In societies in which special methods and techniques exist, their purpose is to safeguard the tradition as closely as possible to its original form and transfer it to every succeeding generation. ‘This may be done by training people to whom the tradition is then entrusted, or by exercising some form of control over each recital of the tradition.’ Whatever the method may be, accurate transmission is more likely if a tradition is not public property, rather left to the knowledge of a special group assigned for such purposes. The use of representative devices and instruments for the sake of designating ideas in tradition also assure successful transmission.<sup>23</sup>

An Oral Tradition may be adjunct to systems of sanctions and rewards, which are designed to those whose duty is to know the tradition. The reward and the sanction would come depending on the performance of the actors with respect to success in recitation without doing any mistake. This custom of designing sanctions and rewards was a direct outcome of the employment of specialists, and is an effective method of control for ensuring accurate repetition of the testimony.<sup>24</sup>

21 *Ibid*, p. 174.

22 *Ibid*, p. 176.

23 *Ibid*, p. 131.

24 Vansina, Jan. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Chicago: Aldine, 1965, p. 33

This implies that Oral Traditions are not always transmitted in the same way. A society may have certain institutions for regulating the method of transmission of certain traditions in a way that the original testimony of the observer can be preserved as faithfully as possible. Thus the historian can assess to what extent the method of transmission used for any particular tradition is likely to have provided for favourable circumstances for an accurate handing-down of the proto-testimony upon which it is based.<sup>25</sup>

As a matter of fact, a historian can never arrive at a full knowledge of the past, but only at an approximation to the facts, and this approximation can only be based on whatever data are available. Therefore, in the absence of any indication of falsification, or in the absence of any distortion it is relevant for the historian to accept the tradition as being reliable.<sup>26</sup>

Of course, with respect to transmission the culture values of a particular society have also have an effect on Oral Traditions. This could happen in the following three ways:

1. Through the medium of the first informant, they determine the choice of what events to record and the significance attached to them.
2. Through the medium of certain cultural concepts, chiefly those concerning time and historical development, they distort chronology and the historical perspective.
3. Lastly, they make testimonies based on to cultural ideals, thus turning them into examples to be followed.<sup>27</sup>

However, such effects of cultural values do not deter the historian from utilizing them. Rather they are indicators for the historian to sift a tradition he/she come across off the influences with an always given assumption existing in the narratives. All these are not conscious processes. The historian can, however, judge the effects produced by examining the traditions themselves, except circumstances of deliberate choice for events to record. But he/she must exercise the most careful judgement when doing so, for this is the most potent of all the influences which tend to change testimonies into a mirage far removed from reality.<sup>28</sup>

Through a prudent examination of all available indications, the historian can often reach at an assessment of the reliability of the information supplied by the initial informant and of the continuity or discontinuity of the chain of transmission.

After the information in a tradition has been understood, and, when examination for possible distortions is over, if it has been found to contain reliable information, one can then continue to the final stage of critical analysis - the comparison of

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> Vansina, J. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Chicago: Aldine, 1965, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.



testimonies, which will result in a better assessment of the value each testimony as evidence of the events described.<sup>29</sup>

This does not mean that every tradition is devoid of problems or shortcomings and the process of identifying different influences an Oral Tradition is never simple. To show the existence of short comings and the necessity to well aware of it is expressed by Vansina in the following way:

“It is important to take for granted that historical information that can be obtained from Oral Traditions varies according to the type of tradition. A survey of the typology of tradition and an outline of the characteristics of each type show that the types vary widely, and that all have a given historical bias which imposes certain limitations, but which gives each type its own particular usefulness in providing information about certain particular aspects of the past. The limitations of the information that can be derived from Oral Traditions are real, and must be accepted by the historian; but he can attempt to make up for them by using data supplied by other historical sources, such as written documents, and the disciplines of archaeology, cultural history, linguistics, and physical anthropology. This attempt at least helps the historian to arrive at parts of past history which are preserved in the various surviving historical documents. A tradition is of very little use as a historical source unless all the relevant preliminary investigations have been carried out and the testimonies collected systematically, since otherwise there are no proper means available for testing its reliability.”<sup>30</sup>

## Bibliography

- Allen, B., and William, L.M.  
1991 *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.
- Bahan, P.  
1996 *Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Davis, C., Kathryn B., and Kay M.  
1977 *Oral History: From Tape to Type*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Henson, P.M. and Susan L. M.  
1988 *Oral History Project Procedures Manual*. Revised ed. Washington, D.C.: Archives and Special Collections of the Smithsonian Institution.
- Hodder, I. and Hutson, S.  
2003 *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

<sup>30</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, London: Currey, 1985, p. 183.

1992 Oral History Association. *Evaluation Guidelines*. Los Angeles: Oral History Association.

Robertshaw (ed.).

1980 *A History of African Archaeology*, James Currey, London.

Vansina, J.

1965 *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Chicago: Aldine.

Taylor, W.

1983 *A Study of Archaeology*. Souther Illinois University, USA.

Wooley L.

1954 *Digging up the Past*. Penguin Books, Great Britain.

### Electronic Sources

[http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/pub\\_eg.html](http://omega.dickinson.edu/organizations/oha/pub_eg.html): Oral History Evaluation Guidelines Oral History Association Pamphlet Number 3 Adopted 1989, Revised Sept. 2000

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historiography>: From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: Historiography

<http://www.stfx.ca/research/SRSF/ResearchResources/OralHistoricalMethodology.html>: Oral Historical Methodology Supervisor: Sean Cadigan.

[http://nigerdeltacongress.com/articles/an\\_african\\_philosophy\\_of\\_history.htm](http://nigerdeltacongress.com/articles/an_african_philosophy_of_history.htm): An African Philosophy of History in the Oral Tradition By E. J. Alagoa University of Port Harcourt

<http://www.answers.com/topic/oral-law>: oral law.