

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON
Department of History
Semester I, 1987-88

History 861

Vansina

SEMINAR: METHODOLOGY OF ORAL TRADITION AND PRECOLONIAL WEST AFRICA

GENERAL TOPIC

West Africa: West Africa comprises perhaps half of the population South of the Sahara. Its historiography is fascinating for several reasons: it may well be the richest for any area south of the Sahara and the most diversified. There are more sources and more diverse sources for a longer timespan than elsewhere; much of the Black American cultural heritage stems from there. These reasons make it well suited for our topic.

Precolonial history: The precolonial period is an aspect of African history that is not fashionable for western historians in the 1980s, but continues to be crucial to the interests of most historians in Africa who recognize paramount importance for the modern African heritage. Reconstructing this past for many centuries has been most thorough in West Africa and such reconstructions are based on a great diversity of sources. This allows us to see retrospectively what the contributions and characteristics of various types of sources have been at different periods. We will be working mostly with the 16th to 18th centuries.

X Oral history: Oral tradition is a phenomenon of interest to sociology (in its reflection of the present), psychologists (for its implications concerning the dynamics of memory) humanists (verbal and other performing arts) and historians (as sources). The role of such sources in historical reconstruction is to give the historian the present collective view of a social group with regard to its past. This is close enough to what happened to be taken seriously. Oral traditions are the only major category of sources which are the inside view, whether of the whole population, of an elite or of some submerged group. Oral tradition should therefore be taken as the first hypothesis concerning the past to be tried out in actual reconstruction. What now have these traditions in fact contributed to precolonial West African history is the core of our topic.

READING ORIENTATION

West Africa: J. A. Ajayi, M. Crowder, History of West Africa, 2nd ed., 2 vols., mostly vol. 1.
Cambridge History of Africa, vol. 4.
UNESCO History of Africa, vol. 5 (in ms.).
O. Ikime, Groundwork of Nigerian History, Ibadan 1980.
P. D. Curtin, The Atlantic Slave Trade, Madison 1969.
P. E. Lovejoy, Transformations in Slavery, Cambridge 1983.
Bulletin IFAN B.
Journals of Historical Societies, Ghana, Nigeria.

Oral Tradition: Hampate, Ba in UNESCO History, vol. 1.

- D. Henige, Oral Historiography, London 1982 (+bibliog).
J. Vansina, Oral Traditions as History, Madison 1985.
(+bibliog).
J. C. Miller (ed.), The African Past Speaks, Hamden 1980.
P. Irwin, Liptako Speaks, Princeton 1981 (West Africa).
H. Diabate, La tradition orale, Paris 1987 (Sanwi).
Papers of the Lagos Conference, June 1987 (West Africa).

Methodology in reconstruction:

- P. Bellwood, The Polynesians, London 1987 (2nd ed.).
C. Ehret, M. Posnanski (eds.), The Archaeological and Linguistic Reconstruction of African History, Los Angeles 1982.
D. F. McCall, Africa in Timeperspective, Boston 1964.
D. Nurse, T. Spear, The Swahili, Philadelphia 1985.
T. Spear, Kenya's Past, London 1981.
History in Africa and its bibliographies.

- Historiography: C. Neale, Writing Independent History, Westport 1985,
(especially chapter 4).

PAPERS

Two papers to be written, the first on the background of the case chosen, or a type of oral evidence; the second as assessment of the oral evidence used, its problems, its uses. Suggested topics are:

A. Case studies and actual use of oral tradition vs. other sources

- Wolof
1. ~~Vol~~ of history esp. Jolof
start Boubakar Barry +Ph.D. V. Bomba (Coifman)
 2. What about Roots? Do Gambian traditions support the book?
 3. Malik Sy, Bundu and early Jihads
sugg. Cahiers d'etudes africaines vol. 100, 1987
 4. Macina.:
start with Ba and Daget and Ph.D. W. Brown
 5. Segu and the Bamana kingdom
start with R. L. Roberts. Use Bazin, Meillassoux et al.
 6. Northern Ghana (Gonja, Dagomba, Konkomba, etc.)
start with J. Anquandah in Af. Arch. Review 1987 + his book
Societies in large parts of Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and
nearby Mali are interesting but often require the use of German
 7. Anyi cases. Ndenye or/and Sanwi
start with C. H. Perrot (Ndenye) H. Diabate (Sanwi)
 8. Abron but only if 3 vol. Ph.D. of E. Terray is available
 9. Igbo
start with Onweujogwu and Isixhei (Jos papers)
 10. Kwararafa and the Benue project
start with Erim and with Shain (Etulo paper)

11. The Benin scheme. Dovetailing sources or not?
start with Ryder, Bradbury, Ben Amos and Egharevba
 12. Yoruba Oyo, Ife, Ketu in the 18 thc.
start with History in Africa 1987 (Andrew Apter)
 13. Bariba
start with Mercier
 14. Gurma
start with Madiega
- B. Oral traditions actually used compared to the reconstruction made
1. Notation, performance, translation
start with Williamson and Amali ~~use~~
 2. The history of Niimi and a study of the traditions edited by Wright
 3. The Delta Alagoa's histories and his texts
 4. Asantesem and political biography
start with Asantesem and its uses by the Wilks' school
 5. The Mosi kingdoms
use the Izard records
 6. David Robinson, Oral Tradition and the Jihad of all Hajj 'Umar
- C. Special characteristics: griots, cliches etc.
1. Griots and the history of Mali
start with Steward, Niane and Sory Camara: Gens de la parole, Kouyate Namankumba, (Algiers). -or Soninke
 2. Hunters in West African Oral Tradition
start with Sheikh Tijaan Hayidara, La geste de Fanta Maa
 3. Why Oral Tradition when there is literacy?
start with J. Ewald Speaking Writing and Authority- Comp. Stud., Society
 4. What happened to oral tradition in Sierra Leone and in Liberia?
The cases of E. Tomkin and A. Jones
 5. What about Chronology?
start with Irwin and consensus in literature, then go over various chronological types in tradition and their exploitation. Use Erim Onjeowogwu as one extreme
 6. Making tradition? The Akan coast.
Use D. Henige's articles
- D. The use of oral tradition for x type of history (military, art, etc.)
- Make your own proposals.