

## **Making Connections:**

### **African and Canadian Oral History - A Personal View**

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"Whats your father's name?" In Nova Scotia, one is exposed to oral history at a very young age. In the rural village of Economy, where I was brought up and in the nearby communities that I frequented, this enquiry usually came right after "How's she goin'?" The question and the at times elongated response provided an oral testimony of time and place for the enquiries as they frequently were able to tell you more about your family - extended or otherwise - than you really wanted to know. This was my earliest experience with genealogy and oral history and as I will show, it stood me in good stead when I began my academic career.

Unlike many other contributors to this volume, the emphasis of my research has not been Canada-centered. As noted, I was brought up in the oral culture of Nova Scotia but my passion for history took me across the Atlantic to undertake research in Africa. Fortunately for me, much of that research was oral and had to do with family. Before I write of my role in the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA), I would like to recount some of my pre-COHA oral history experiences. My intentions are two-fold. The first is to ensure that there is an international component in this issue of *Forum* and the second is to provide an example of oral history techniques in a society without document.

In 1969, I received a Commonwealth Scholarship to study at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. I had already lived and worked in Ghana for two years so was quite excited by the prospect of undertaking my graduate work in African history at one of the preeminent centers of specialization in oral history and oral tradition. By 1971, I had begun field work on my Ph.D. topic.

The objective of the research was to collect material on an area in central Nigeria called the Jos Plateau. This was to be an historical work and I was expected to analyze at some length what the political, social and economic systems were in this area before the British invaders arrived in 1903. I then proposed to show the changes that the societies in this area underwent due to this invasion and the resultant occupation by the colonizing power. My immediate reaction was to turn to the written sources, rummage through the archives, libraries and private collections of any and all who had anything to do with the Jos Plateau. I soon found that such sources were very scarce and even if available were not extensive. In addition, written historical sources were used by the British Administration to drape a cloak of legitimacy over the type of government they imposed upon the peoples they conquered. History demanded a dialogue, a wider perspective thus a collection of oral sources was the only way to achieve a semblance of accuracy in any account of the history of the Jos Plateau.

How to do it? In his book entitled *Oral Tradition* (1965) Jan Vansina had concentrated his oral history methodology on state-structured societies (i.e. societies that are presumed to possess the necessary structure to be considered a state). Much of the pre-colonial history of Africa has been written on nations that were very conscious of the position and role of their state vis-a-vis other African societies. The collection of the history of these states has mainly been through the "court historians" or griots who provided an oral history heavily weighted with court traditions. With the necessity of reliable dating by using, among other things, royal genealogy, modern historians of Africa had found it difficult to free themselves from the lure of royal pageantry. Consequently, African societies without a state structure thus lacked historians to record their history. Such stateless societies existed in abundance on the Jos Plateau. With no court historian, I was forced to abandon Vansina's classical methodology.

In order to study much smaller societies - smaller numerically and geographically - oral history had to be obtained using some other methodology. These stateless or segmentary societies had their own social structure on a much smaller scale but lacked the court chronicler to recount their history to the researcher. Thus I turned to genealogical

research. The informant for such information was the clan head or family head. The clan and family histories of each ethnic group had to be examined, and the merging of such histories would produce, it was hoped, a synthesis of the past. Through these oral informants one could establish the lineage progression, when the families and clans arrived in the area, their relationships to other groups and generally the clan's social, political, and economic contribution to a particular area and people. It was only by examining these diverging and converging lines that one was able to build up a composite picture of a lineage, village or ethnic nation where such existed.

The who and how had been established. But what was to be asked, how would it be asked and most importantly, how would it be answered. It was necessary to know as much as possible about the social and political structure of each individual ethnic group before attempting to trace the problems of that society's past. In taking the clan history approach, I had to always be aware of the present political situation in which a clan functioned. This assisted me in understanding the interpretation each clan would give of the past. Many times, the past is recounted to settle a problem that has arisen in the present. This was especially true of the Jos Plateau where the colonial and particularly the post-colonial periods had produced a greater awareness of the bonds of ethnicity. To begin an interview with questions on the present was a great mistake, for the informants immediately identified the researcher (myself) with the Local Government in Jos, the capital of the state, and vociferously presented their claims on land and boundary disputes. Although such disputes were of interest, they were complicating factors which I would try to avoid when I was introduced to each village or group of clans. I perceived that it would be more disarming as well as practical to concentrate on the beginnings of a people and pursue this line step by step up to the twentieth century. By the time a sufficient wealth of pre-colonial material had been gathered, I felt I would have established an excellent rapport with the elders and the information sought on the colonial times (after 1903) was easier to extract.

Basically, to understand the changes wrought by colonial intrusion, it was necessary to have some idea of the structure of the society before 1900. The question "At what point does one begin?"

interposed itself here and the logical answer in an oral collection of this kind appears to be to take the myths of origin then collect and construct from that point up to the present. I did not feel that a cut off line in the past should be drawn. The totality of the people's history should be taken when such an opportunity presents itself. I could then extract those parts which I felt were necessary and pertinent to my work. To insert myself in a particular time sequence may well open gaps in the proper chronology of events and leave me with a disjointed collection of inconsequential facts and/or myths. Time was available, therefore, the history of an area was pursued as far back as possible.

In this work both individual and group interviews were used to acquire information, each having its particular value. Before I went to a village for a meeting, I would contact the village chief a week in advance, and agree on a date and time for a meeting with all those who knew about the history of their village. I requested that the chief invite all the elders to come to the place which was usually used for village meetings. This location varied from village to village for it could be the chief's compound, the village square under a baobab tree or near a primary school. I would try to send a note in the local language a couple of days before the meeting to confirm that I was coming.

Thus, when my interpreter and I came for the meeting, there were gathered anywhere from eight to thirty elders. Usually the village chief or the school-master would introduce us to the elders and he would include in this introduction a brief description of my work and its importance to the village. My interpreter would then proceed with the questioning of individuals in order to identify the names of elders and clans. Once this was done, queries were addressed to the group as a whole.

The group interview was essential in such areas where usually the clan history was better remembered. This allowed the elders to each make a contribution to the village history and also acted as a check on historical distortion when one clan asserted its superiority over the other. In a group meeting, elders were more apt, after some discussion, to reach a consensus and thus dampen clan rivalry. Although there were some attempts by the village chief to justify his position by insisting upon his claim to office, these insecure individuals were few in number.

Generally the elders held the floor and the points raised and debated provided not only information but also talking points that could be raised in private with the individual informant.

I did not find a tape recorder at all useful in such situations for the following reasons: (1) The meeting took place in the open air and this made the recording conditions difficult. (2) With such a large number of individuals, proper identification of a speaker as well as the simple task of getting the microphone near him proved distracting to the interview as a whole. (When interviewing I usually constructed a seating plan. As I was taking notes, I had assigned numbers to each speaker). (3) The meeting could be anywhere from four to eight hours making the transcribing time with the interpreter up to four times as long as the recording time. With 20-20 hindsight, I now wish I had recorded all these interviews despite the difficulties.

In order to make the meeting as amicable as possible, cigarettes and local beer (*pito*) were provided for the elders during and after each session. It was at this time that I took the opportunity to record any praise songs or war songs that the elders would like to sing. Appointments were also made by my interpreter with those elders who could flesh out the bare bones of the group meeting. At times, this had to be done very discreetly so there would be no social repercussions from the village head or other interested parties.

The group meeting would present its own type of problems and therefore had to be handled with care. Outside interference from beyond the village, lengthy disputes over a chief list, or a chief-controlled meeting had to be guarded against. In one village meeting of thirty elders, the village chief insisted on allowing only his version of the local history to be presented and would not allow any others, who opposed his version, to speak. I then had to find some pretext to go interview those whom I felt may be of some value as a means of checking what the village chief had said. I found that the ancestors of the village chief had usurped authority in the village about one hundred and fifty years before and he wanted to make sure I did not learn of this. In another village, the chief did not invite a number of elders for he said they could "cause trouble" and "lie." I had to seek out these "troublemakers" with a

maximum of tact, i.e., in a way that did not make it appear that I was calling the village chief a liar.

Individual interviews were often tape-recorded, again depending on the feelings of the elder involved. Many times it was an inverse relationship, that is the more educated a man was the less likely he wanted to be recorded. Usually, then, a notebook was used and these notes were later recopied.

In both group and individual interviews, the question form was unstructured - an open-ended interview. Although certain specific topics were raised, each was done in depth rather than going through a set question and answer format. This allowed for a greater control of the discussion by the interviewer in that the pace could be judged as to what subject was becoming tiresome or whether it was to be left out and returned to later on. Active demonstrations of warfare tactics or the exhibit of a relic by an elder was always encouraged. Every effort was made to involve as many in the group as possible in the question period otherwise only two or three respondents, usually associated with the chief's house, would answer the questions. There were always others who may provide a better answer to a question on trade or livestock who would keep silent if not encouraged to speak out. This was particularly true if the meeting was held in a village head's compound and the elder did not wish to refute what the chief's clansmen had said. He was usually restrained by the fact that he was in the village chief's house. At times when sought out later, the elder may also refuse to discuss a topic if I had been accompanied by the chief's messenger. Thus, even when the identification with the Local Government had been avoided, association with the village chief or his clan could create problems.

If I had restricted myself to individual interviews, one would have been left with individual clan propaganda with very little check on the account given. Thus, it was most useful to have the group interview first to provide some sort of framework into which specific details could be fitted. In general, all information had to be checked against that of other informants so factual accuracy could be maintained. Quite often an informant's degree of accuracy would depend on the subject matter and so everything he said could not be dismissed out of hand if one part was found to be wrong.

An important part of writing oral history in Africa is a dating chart which will give the writer and the reader some chronology of the historical events of a particular area of study. Although exact dates would be preferable, it is of value to obtain relative dates and establish the proper sequence of events. This is common for all genealogical research.

In my study, the dating method used was similar to that outlined by historians B.A. Ogot in *History of the Southern Luo* (1967) and D.W. Cohen, *The Historical Tradition of Busoga* (1972). The generation span of twenty-seven years which I used in my study was based on an average age taken from a selection of seventy-five informants for all the ethnic groups on the plateau. This generation period was arrived at by taking the time between the date the informant was born around 1900 (about the time the British arrived) and the time that his first child was born. This was usually between 1923 and 1928. This time span of twenty-seven years was then applied to the man's ancestral line as he had recounted it. As in other societies, ancestral names were given in sequence along the male line. That is, the name Pam Dung Bot told me that the informant's name is Pam, his father was Dung, and his grandfather was Bot. In all cases, I never assumed the above but always ensured that the informant confirmed this ancestral connection as valid. In this way a dating structure was set up which proved to be valid for all groups on the Jos Plateau.

The clan system of dating was of great value especially if there had been no central authority in the village in pre-colonial times. When such a central authority existed, then events may be traced through a list of chiefs. This method raised the problems of disputed chieftaincies as well as the distinct possibility that a younger brother might inherit the chieftaincy, when the older brother died without leaving a male issue or leaving only an under-aged heir. At times, the chieftaincy may pass through two or three brothers before reverting back to the original chief's son or grandson. If he left no heir, the chieftaincy would pass to his next eldest brother's family. Given the possibility of error clan lists were preferred by me to chief lists as the former always proved more accurate.

The difficulty as to the number of years to be assessed for filial rulers was settled after due consideration of the birth rate established by the British missionaries in the 1920s (i.e., one child in three did not survive childbirth) and the birth ratio of male and female children (1:1). As the births were by custom spaced by two and a half years, this presented a possible age differentiation of about six years for brothers of the same mother. Again on the side of caution and with an error factor in mind, this figure was doubled to give a time differential of twelve years for each brother who succeeded to the chieftaincy. This figure, together with the twenty-seven year generation time period, provided a high degree of correlation with the major events of the last century as well as the migration stories of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The concept of an error factor as it applied to oral history was widely used by Ogot and Cohen for their studies in East Africa. They calculated a plus or minus error factor of twenty years beginning with the informant's generation. For each preceding generation, two years was added to this error factor, hence 1873-1900 +/- 20, then 1846-1873 +/- 22, etc. For my research, I found this error factor of anywhere from forty to fifty years for events taking place in the nineteenth century exceedingly generous. For example, if an informant states that an event took place in 1846-1873 +/- 22, this means that in the extreme it could have taken place between 1824 and 1895. I found however that virtually all chronological events when properly correlated with the genealogical lines provided by informants fell within the generation period of twenty-seven years. Therefore, for those events of the nineteenth century, some of which were contemporary with dated events and, therefore, could be correlated. I did not add the error factor as I did not think it necessary to utilize it. As there was no external check on the pre-nineteenth century oral history of the Jos Plateau, it was more credible to have a rather conservative error factor.

Not surprisingly, the field work lasted for two years and well over 300 interviews were amassed. The oral research that I was then able to draw on meant that 80% of the resultant thesis was based on oral history/oral tradition and 100% of the historical narrative of the period before 1900 was oral evidence. The scores of genealogies that were tabulated allowed for the establishment of an historical chronology where there had not been one before - for clans and communities this meant the

tracing of their historical oral record back to the early 1600's. The result was an historical account of an area in Nigeria that lacked any previous written records whatsoever and the creation of a database which future African historians would be able to challenge, critique and corroborate.

Oral research, then and now, has been widely accepted as a legitimate source in the study of African history. It has opened up new methods and disciplines to the historian and drawn to the serious researcher sources that may not have previously been considered. It has allowed the Griot to speak, to be heard and most importantly to be read. In the process it has taken history away from the official historians be they black or white and placed it in the hands and mouths of the common people.

It is with this African experience in oral tradition that I returned to Canada in 1976 determined to play a role in promoting oral history in Canada. I attended my first meeting of COHA in Edmonton in 1977 with such luminaries as Robert Cosbey (President), Jane McCracken (Vice-President), and Neil Rosenberg (Treasurer). It was COHA's fourth annual conference. I then served as President of COHA from 1978 to 1980 with J.P. Moreau (Vice-President), Krzysztof Gebhard (Treasurer), French Language Secretary Bruno Jean and English Language Secretary Gary Hughes. During this period, the organization had two objectives. The first was to participate as an organization at what was called the Learned's (today's academic congress) and the other was to establish regional oral history associations. In 1980, the Learned's met at Université du Québec à Montréal and COHA met for the first time at this gathering with a full programme and keynote speaker Paul Thompson. At that meeting, we passed the Association's first Guide to Ethics and Responsibilities. Earlier in September 1979, I coordinated the first regional meeting in Truro, N.S. and the Atlantic Oral History Association (AOHA) was founded. Subsequent meetings were organized by Ronald Labelle in Memramcook, N.B. and Elizabeth Beaton in Baddeck among others. In 1986 three organizations COHA, AOHA, and Society for the Study of Ethnicity in Nova Scotia (SSENS) came together in Cape Breton, again at Baddeck and the end result was the publication of *Work, Ethnicity and Oral History* by Dorothy Moore and James H. Morrison.

It was becoming clear to the COHA membership that, lacking regular yearly meetings, it was imperative that the COHA *Journal* be maintained for the future viability of the organization. The *Journal* had been in existence since 1975. Since its founding, it had reflected the interests of a diverse organizational membership of archivists, historians, broadcasters and folklorists. It included both practical and theoretical articles as it appealed to both beginners and experienced practitioners. However, with less public funding available for conferences, it was evident that the *Journal* could no longer rely on conference papers for its publication but had to solicit submission wherever and whenever possible.

In 1988, for the first time, the *Journal* left the National Archives of Canada and moved to Saint Mary's University in Halifax. I assumed the editorship (1988-95), and, with the financial assistance of the Dean of Arts office, six yearly issues were produced. One of COHA's major accomplishments during this period was to receive federal funding for a National Inventory of Oral History Collections.

A COHA Committee consisting of Wilma MacDonald, Richard Lohead, Joan Fairweather and myself, together with researcher Norman Fortier, collected and inventoried over 700 oral history projects across Canada. The resulting 400+ page manuscript titled *Guide to Oral History Collection in Canada/Guide des fonds d'histoire orale au Canada* was published in 1993 as Volume 13 of the *Journal* for all subscribers and went out to all subscribers and most libraries across Canada.

The *Journal* continued to be bilingual with an extended book/video review section and an international section. Various issues included articles on hoboes, Mormons in Canada, Frontier College, Icelandic sagas and even Herodotus made an appearance. It was a rewarding seven-year period for me as I was also teaching one of the only oral history university credit courses in Canada.

In 1996, Ron LaBelle at Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton agreed to assume the editorship and the renamed *journal Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* became a reality. I remained as book review editor and still retain that position.

Through its highs and lows, the Canadian Oral History Association has persevered. There have always been the faithful few who have appreciated the importance of oral history and committed themselves to the organization and to the *Journal or Forum*. We are still standing after thirty years and I thank them for that. From my perspective, oral history whether in Canada, Africa or globally has become a respected research tool that has opened new vistas on the past. Its inclusive nature has allowed voices to be raised where there was once silence and provided a new and important focus on those who had previously occupied the periphery of the historical mainstream. May it long continue to do so.