

1 - Historiography and Historical Skills

THE WRITING OF HISTORY

The historian's goal is not to collect the "facts" about the past but rather to acquire insights into the ideas and realities that shaped the past of lives of men and women of earlier societies. Some of the beliefs and institutions of the past may seem alien to us, others may also seem too familiar. But in either case, when we study the people of the past, what we are really learning about is the rich diversity of human experience. The study of history, however, is the study of the beliefs and desires, practices and institutions of human beings.

African history is the study of the past institutions and cultures of the people who live in Africa. The economic, political and social activities of the people who had once lived in Africa are studied under African history. The following is the importance of studying African history.

- i. The study of history like other disciplines help some individuals to earn a living (career aspect). It serves as a source of employment for people who study the subject at a higher level.
- ii. The study of African history has helped in the discovery of the activities of man in far off times. Africa has been proved by researchers like Dr. Louis Leakey to be the original home of man (*Homo sapiens*). The study of African history would lead to more discoveries of hidden facts. It will highlight Africa's contribution to world civilization.
- iii. The study of African history gives the individual the opportunity to relate his past with the present in a better way. Thus, the various stages of society's development that has to be evaluated to understand the present situation. One will best understand the social, economic and political state of affairs of the society if they know how things were done in the past. This gives them the key to find solutions to today's problems.
- iv. African history has addressed the notion and misconception that Africa has contributed insignificantly to history and to dispel the idea of white superiority, e.g., the Hamitic hypothesis assumed that the African 'Hamites' were 'whites' akin to the European as they and their culture were inherently superior to the Black Africans and their culture, so that wherever Black Africans had apparently made a striking advance, the explanation must be sought in 'Hamitic' influence. Early Arab and European travelers met Africans in different cultural settings. The African has distinctive names, music and dances, political and religious settings as well as rites of passage. Because these practices did not conform to the cultural practices of the Europeans and the Arab writers, they classified Africans as primitive, backward or culturally stagnant.
- v. African history enables the student to develop a critical mind and appreciate the variety of human behavior and motives and understand politics, economics and society. In this respect, history in the African context can increase human tolerance and respect for

differences in opinion. Knowledge of other cultures through the appreciation of history encourages students of history to engage in critical analysis of their own culture and society and to understand and criticize their own assumptions.

vi. The study of African history is beneficial since it helps to acquire knowledge about African traditions, culture, norms, and values and to take pride in them and present them. One is able to perceive and recognize the meaning of events from a perspective other than our own to appreciate the diversity of human beliefs and cultures.

vii. African history enables the history student to acquire knowledge of their own country and the African continent.

viii. African history has a practical use in international relations and diplomacy. Its study promotes international understanding and sympathy.

ix. Studying African history will enable the history student to acquire the skills and values that our past can give. African history students can be inspired by events and deeds of great people that will instill in them a sense of pride.

x. A proper examination of the past can tell us a great deal about how we came to be who we are.

xi. One studies African history to be able to appreciate the use of other sources in the writing and reconstruction of African history apart from written sources.

xii. It enables the student to develop an accurate sense of African historical chronology.

SOURCES OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Most rural communities in countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, The Gambia and Ghana obtain their drinking water from streams or hand dug wells. One may describe such streams and wells as a community's source of water supply. Similarly, historians use the term historical sources to refer to the means by which historical information is gotten. Again, by historical sources, the historian means traces that the past has left of itself in the present, in the form of document, artifacts, buildings, castles and forts, coins, institution, traditions, festivals, customs and so forth.

TYPES OR SOURCES OF AFRICAN HISTORY

There are two sources for the writing of history. They are the primary and the secondary sources

- Primary sources

Primary sources are materials produced by the people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under discussion, either as participants or as witnesses. Some primary sources are written documents such as letters, diaries, newspaper and magazine articles, speeches, autobiographies, treatise, census data and marriage, birth and death registers. In addition, historians often examine primary sources that are not written. Examples are works of art, films, recordings, items of clothing, household objects, tools and archaeological remains.

- Oral sources (interviews) and eyewitness accounts can be used as primary sources.

DOCUMENTARY OR WRITTEN SOURCES OF AFRICAN HISTORY

This refers to documents or written accounts which give information about past events concerning people. Examples of documentary sources are:

- i. Newspapers
- ii. Diaries
- iii. Travelers' account
- iv. Journals
- v. Reports of commissions of enquiry
- vi. Manifesto parties
- vii. Government official records
- viii. Minutes of meetings
- ix. Private letters
- x. Official reports of officers
- xi. Court records
- xii. Books
- xiii. Anniversary brochures
- xiv. Tributes
- xv. Magazines etc

IMPORTANCE OR ADVANTAGES OF WRITTEN SOURCES OF AFRICAN HISTORY

i. Easy To Use

It is easier to use written sources in the reconstruction of African history. This is because books or documents can often be carried from one place to another where the reader or the writer wants to use it. This cannot be done in the non-documentary sources.

ii. Accurate and Reliable Facts

Written records of contemporary issues give first-hand information which is naturally more accurate and reliable. This is because dates and events are chronologically well recorded. For example minutes of meetings give exact and accurate date, and the time the meeting was held. Similarly, records written in diaries are recorded on the spot as events occur or soon after. This helped historians to know the exact dates for instance the Asante fought with the British because the wars were documented. Written sources help reduce any tendency of the historian to use guesswork in his work.

iii. Effective Means of Keeping Records

Keeping accurate records of events is very difficult especially where written sources are lacking and people rely solely on oral tradition. One can say therefore that written sources are more effective means or method of keeping records of past events.

iv. Promotion of Research

Written sources of African history promote research work. For instance, when readers feel that there is a deficiency in a written account, they are encouraged to dig further in order to contribute to greater and more accurate knowledge about the issue.

v. Help Cross-Checking Information

Written sources help in cross-checking data or information collected from oral and other sources of historical knowledge. This help to reach reliable conclusions.

vi. Provision of Detailed Information

Documents provide more detailed information than oral sources, e.g. dates, illustrative pictures, names of participants in events etc..

WEAKNESSES/DISADVANTAGES/LIMITATIONS OF WRITTEN SOURCES OF AFRICAN HISTORY

i. Easily Destroyed

Written sources can easily be destroyed by termites, rodents, fire, flood, earthquakes, humidity, etc. Written records destroyed by any of these disasters cannot be retrieved unlike oral sources which can be retold. Termites and rodents may also eat away vital information in written forms.

ii. Condition Biases and Distortions

Another major limitation of written sources of history is that they may contain biases and distortions. The writer may intentionally write to suit his opinions or leave out some aspects of the events which are not to his liking. For example some books written by European writers state that slave trading is a blessing to the people of West Africa. Others have written in their books that until the coming of Europeans in West Africa, the history of West Africa was only wars and misery.

iii. False Information

Again, one of the strongest demerit of written source is, once certain materials or information have been written down, people take them to be as fact even when they are not crosschecked. Not all the information found in writing or books should be taken to be historical truth; there could be a little bit of exaggeration, bias or prejudice.

iv. Expensive

Written materials are expensive. The writer needs materials like paper, pen, book, diary, etc to put down events. Also, before one gets written materials, they may have to make use of the other sources like archeology, linguistics etc.

v. Difficult to get

Once again, written materials are hard to come by, especially in Africa where the art of writing started late. Even in Africa where they are available, they are fragmentary and far between. Since writing began very late in Africa apart from ancient Egypt, written records are generally scanty and scarce. This means that the historian has to rely more on the non-documentary sources, making the work more difficult.

vi. Getting Lost

Written materials can get lost, thus depriving the people the historical information if they are the only sources of information.

vii. Illiteracy

Documentary sources are written materials that have been put into writing and to be able to read one needs to be literate (able to read and write). Many Africans cannot read nor write, hence rendering written sources of African history deficient in the reconstruction of African history.

viii. Consult Experts

Finally, to come out with authentic written materials, the services of experts in the other disciplines like archeology, linguistics, etc. are needed in order to interpret correctly historical events.

NON DOCUMENTARY OR UNWRITTEN SOURCES OF AFRICAN HISTORY

This refers to pieces of information about past events collected from sources of history other than books and other written materials. This explains why this section refers to unwritten sources. Examples of non-documentary sources are Archaeology, Oral Tradition, Linguistic, Ethnography, Art forms/History, Ethnobotany, Ethnozoology, Ethnomusicology, Numismatics, and Serology.

ORAL TRADITION AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Oral tradition refers to accounts of the traditions about the past passed from generation to generation by word of mouth or other methods. It is usually passed on in the form of a story, legend, song, myth, folk tales, customs or other forms of music. There are two forms of oral traditions:

1. The Fixed Text Type
2. Free Text Type

The fixed text type of oral traditions have an unchanging format and content and have to be memorized and passed on from generation to generation. Example of 'fixed text' type are words of folk music, praise songs, drum music and horn music.

An example of drum music is the Mpintin drums of Denkyira which recall the past hegemony and wealth of that state in two terse lines: 'kotoko som amponsem' (the porcupine i.e. Asante serves Amponsem-the king of Denkyira) and 'Boa Amponsem a odi sika atomprada' (King Boa Amponsem who uses fresh gold all the time).

Similarly, Abuakwa horn music immortalize the valour of Abuakwa's Queen Dokuaa at the Akatamanso (1826) they sing 'Dokua obaa basia a oko oprem ano' (Dokua the valiant woman who fought before canon).

The free-text type consists of accounts of events usually stool (dynastic) histories and family or village traditions. For example some court officials can memorize some aspects of the state history and can tell others when necessary. Some court officials include the linguist (okyeame), court heralds (esen) and executioners (abrafo) in the Akan states. Also, in Mali the (griot) and Togo (evne) played similar roles.

MERITS/ADVANTAGES/BENEFITS OF ORAL TRADITION AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

i. Easily Accessible

Oral tradition is easily accessible in the sense that, gathering information by the historian does not involve much work. In every community, town or village in Africa, one can get some elders who are ready to give the traditions and historical events in the area. The historian in one way or the other, only need to contact knowledgeable informants and respondents for the necessary information needed.

ii. Main Source of History

In the absence of other sources, oral tradition becomes one of the sole sources of writing history. In a situation where there are no written records or other pieces of information like personal diaries, minutes of meetings, journals etc. the historian often relies to a large extent on the information provided by oral tradition to compile his findings.

iii. Helps Other Sources

Oral tradition as a source of African history has helped to confirm historical facts from other sources. For example, it helps the archeologist to confirm their findings thus throwing more light on the findings of the history of a place. Again, the archaeologist would have to be directed by a story from the local people before he goes to excavate the site. Therefore, without oral tradition, the archaeologist's work become difficult.

iv. Historical Trends and Events

Oral tradition helps the historian to determine historical trends and events. Through the comparison of several oral traditions, the historian can eliminate biases, inconsistencies or inaccuracies in the written records they are using, to come out with an accurate historical account of the past.

v. Interpretation of Archeological Findings

Oral tradition has also helped in the interpretation of archeological data dug from the soil. This is necessary because the artefacts found are both anonymous and fragmentary. For instance, if an archaeologist unearthed human skeletons with lost limbs apparently severed by sharp-edged materials, they may deduce that the excavated site was a mass grave where people who died after an armed conflict were buried. They may not conclude with that, but rather validate their evidence by embarking upon personal enquiry, interviewing target groups in the area. If they are lucky, they would have pieces of information about events similar to what they have speculated.

vi. Preservation of History

Oral tradition has done a lot to assist with the reconstruction of African history, this is because Africans have relied on oral traditions to preserve their history for centuries. It is

again, the only living source of historical reconstruction because it gives room for further questioning and analysis of the information given to ensure its validity or truthfulness.

DEMERITS/DISADVANTAGES/LIMITATIONS/WEAKNESSES/DEFECTS OF ORAL TRADITION AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

i. Not Precise in Detail

In the first instance, oral tradition is not precise in detail. The narrator may give information in a long clumsy way without any specific point. Important aspect of events and their sequences are forgotten as the informants advance in age. As these stories are retold to subsequent generations, they are filled with misrepresentation of facts.

ii. Exaggerations

Oral tradition is full of exaggeration, biases and prejudices. The narrator might add irrelevant information or might leave out information which does not suit his interest. Narrators normally leave out these aspects of the story consciously or unconsciously leading to one-sided information that cannot serve as a sound basis for historical writing.

iii. Inaccurate Figures

Moreover, oral tradition cannot be dated with certainty. The narrator might forget part of the events or important dates. People tend to lose track of events through no fault of theirs and therefore forget the actual date and time that a particular event took place. For instance, situations where an event occurs frequently, it brings confusion in terms of specifics since the narrator does a lot of guesswork.

iv. Death of Informants

Another shortfall of oral tradition is that, death or calamity affecting people can result in the loss of important aspect of oral tradition since only the living can tell it and not the dead. To top it up, if people were afflicted by a calamity leading to the loss of lives including the key informants, then the information of the affected area would be lost forever.

v. Mixing Up Facts

Furthermore in using oral tradition as the main source of reconstruction of African history, details and sequences of events might be forgotten with the passage of time since the human mind keeps the history, one might forget some important points as years pass by.

vi. Difficult to Cross-Check

Indeed cross-checking becomes difficult in oral tradition if the narrator is the only source of information. It is a fact that oral tradition is most likely to contain inaccuracies and failures

to collaborate the information gathered from other source might produce shoddy work hence the need to cross-check and test events.

vii. Emphasis On Personalities And Events

Oral tradition tends to lay more emphasis on personalities like kings, rulers and leaders as well as events like wars and migration to the neglect of social and economic aspects of people's history, thus making the historical approach somewhat narrow, to the disadvantages of scholarship and posterity.

viii. Oral traditionists are men, and thus there is a gendered bias in what is recalled, and the way it is recalled, which may diminish the role women have played in the African past.

ARCHAEOLOGY AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Archaeology is the study of a people's culture of years past through excavation and examination of material remains that are found. It is the understanding of human actions in the past through a study of what they did rather than what they said of themselves. Again, archaeology provides information about how societies adapted their ways of life to suit their natural environment or how they modified their environment to suit their way of life. Archaeological information is obtained through the excavation or digging of specially chosen sites.

In Europe, archaeology has been a useful source of historical evidence since the 19th century AD whereas in Africa, it has been helpful in the reconstruction of the past since the second half of the 20th century.

The archaeologist uses radio-carbon dating (carbon-14 dating) to determine the age of artefacts. The use of this technique to examine running of houses tools and weapons etc. has contributed immensely towards the reconstruction of African history. Among the evidences are the famous Ife works of art in bronze and pottery, which came to the notice of the world through archeological excavations in 1910. Secondly, excavated sites at Igbo Ukwu in the south of Enugu-Nigeria has shown that a highly advanced society existed in that part of Nigeria in the 10th century AD. Thirdly, in the Brong-Ahafo region of modern Ghana, excavation conducted at Begho provided evidence of copper and iron industries. However there are many important sites in West Africa such as Kantora on the Upper Gambia river and Kansala – capital of the Kaabu empire in north-eastern Guinea-Bissau – which still require excavation.

BENEFITS/IMPORTANCE/ADVANTAGES/MERITS/STRENGTHS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

i. Existence of Civilization Long Ago

Archaeological information shows that African societies attained high levels of civilization and development in pre European time. Example is the site excavated at Igbo Ukwu and Ife in Nigeria which have revealed highly advanced societies where bronze and pottery technology were practiced.

ii. Trade Contacts

Archeology helps to reveal the kind of trade contacts that existed among people in the past. A good example is that of the excavations carried out at Begho in the Brong Ahafo region of Ghana, which showed that long before the arrival of the Europeans, Africans were in contact with China, Indonesia, Arabia and Phoenicia, since porcelain, coins, pipes and bottles from these areas were found.

iii. Revelation of Culture

Through the studies of archaeology we get an idea about the political organization of people, their religious/traditional beliefs and economic activities etc. These come to light when archaeologists excavate materials which experts examine and relate them. For instance, if a chief's linguist staff is found after excavations one may relate it to religious/traditional belief or authority.

iv. Ancient Tools

Archeology also provides information about the way different people have adapted to their environment e.g. by revealing the tools they made for various purposes.

v. Make Other Sources Clear

Archeologists help to confirm what can be known from other sources e.g. Oral Tradition

vi. Main sources of Pre-History

Archaeology has helped historians to write history of pre-historic times. Since writing began late in most parts of the continent, archeology has become the main source of information for the reconstruction of African history of the distant past.

vii. How Ancient people lived

Archeologists have revealed in their studies what our ancestors did and so help to provide useful evidence for writing about. Through archeology, the material culture of people in the past becomes known. It is only to excavations that we go to know the kind of building people built and the occupation they engaged in. For example, the ruins in Zimbabwe, Kumbi-Saleh (empire of Ghāna) and the pyramids in Egypt.

viii. Origin of Humanity

Archeological studies have shown that human beings originated from Africa. From this source, it has been proved that Africa was the first home of man (*Homo sapiens*). This has

been proved by the fossils discovered by Dr. and Mrs. Leakey at Olduvai Gorge in the Northern Tanzania.

ix. Dates of Events

Archeological studies help us to date event e.g. the use of carbon-14 dating or radio carbon dating.

x. Reliable Source

It has been a reliable source of history since artifacts could be seen and felt.

DEMERITS/DISADVANTAGES/LIMITATIONS OF ARCHAEOLOGY

i. Guess work

In archaeology, one is bound to use much guess work in the reconstruction of the past, thus leading to inaccurate information. Also, the use of radio-carbon dating always approximate dates. Artifacts found are anonymous and lack the sequence of daily life. Makers and users of such artifacts are usually not known. This makes the archeologist do guesswork.

ii. Very Expensive

The use of archaeology as a source of writing African history is expensive. It is expensive considering high cost of labour excavating machines, finding the selected site, getting permit, laboratory expenses, and special tools among others. The use of the radio carbon dating (carbon 14) in determining the age of an archaeological find is very complex and expensive.

iii. Nature of the Climate/Climate Condition

The nature of the tropical climate in Africa makes it difficult for archeological findings (material remains) to be preserved in the soil. The tropical rainforest has high temperature and rainfall which promotes decay of fossil remains as well as chemical weathering. These conditions facilitate fossil decay and weathering of rocks leaving little or no traces of rock paintings or carvings which are very useful sources of information to historians in their attempt to reconstruct the African past.

iv. Accidental preservation

One major limitation of archeology is that the means by which information is preserved is not deliberate, so most of the findings discovered through excavations are accidental. With this we have the intuition of acquiring some knowledge, but would first at the same time be 'gambling'.

v. View not comprehensive

Archaeological finding is unable to provide a comprehensive view and analysis of the past because it does not tell about the ideological and sociological aspects of life. All these factors limit the scope of information available to the historian.

vi. Spotty information

The information derived from archeology is often spotty because the information is usually got depending on materials found.

vii. Difficult to interpret

Archeology unfortunately needs knowledge of many disciplines to interpret information. For example, chemistry, botany, geology, art, history etc. That is, it is not easy to get one person with knowledge on such disciplines thus making interpretation a difficult task.

viii. Depend on other sources

Archeology rely on information given by oral tradition and written sources. The archeologists in most cases have to receive information about a site or read from a book about a site before excavations can take place. Without receiving information from the local people about a site of ruins, writing African history becomes difficult since the archeologist may be handicapped.

LINGUSITICS AS A SOURCE OF WRITING AFRICAN HISTORY

Linguistics is the scientific study of the origin, structure and changes of a language that occur in the languages over a period of time. Languages do change in vocabulary and grammar over periods of time. Such changes can tell the historian about the adoption of new ideas by people. Some languages, when studied closely relate to the other (Ga and Adangbe; Wali and Dagari; Ewe and Fon; Fante and Bono; and Dagomba and Mossi etc.). One could project that those languages may have developed from one single parent language. The comparative study of such related languages can provide useful information.

MERITS/ADVANTAGES OF LINGUISTICS

Linguistics study has several advantages and importance in the reconstruction of African history.

i. Origin of ethnic group

Linguistics helps us to trace the origin of people and peopling of places e.g. Ewe, Akan, Bantu etc. Studies conducted by one linguist J.H.Greenberg into the origin of the Bantu and other West African languages have helped to arrive at the conclusion that the then Bantu

speakers dispersed throughout the eastern and southern Africa originate from the Nigerian-Cameroon border region.

ii. Confirmation of Origin

Linguistic studies can help confirm or question stories of origin e.g. Ewe as against Ga stories of origin from east of Ghana. In reconstructing Africa's history, linguistics has confirmed the established facts that Ewes once stayed with the Yoruba at Ketu, Benin and Togo before settling in Ghana. This can be found in the language of Ewe speakers in the West African countries.

iii. Identification of ethnic groups

Linguistics helps in identifying people into ethnic groups e.g. Ewe, Akan, Ga-Adange etc. indeed language plays very key role in identifying a group of people. For instance, it is the Ewe people that speak the Ewe language; also Twi is spoken by the Asantes.

iv. Borrowing of words

Linguistics again helps to throw light on the relationships that have existed between peoples e.g. existence of common words would point to exchanges between people otherwise not related. Also, a good example is the Akan words for political and other affairs in the Ga language, and words of Mande origin in Twi and other West African languages. Foreign influence

Furthermore, linguistics enlightens us on the influences that have come to people from outside, e.g. the existence of Portuguese words in Ghanaian languages like paano (bread), bokiti (bucket), asopatre (slippers), krataa (paper) and prete (plate).

vi. New ideas

Linguistics helps us to show the adoption of new ideas by people with changes in vocabulary and grammar. The changes that occur in languages can be studied to tell whether there has been an adoption of new ideas and general historical developments. Example, Akan words in Ga language like 'anokwaley', 'abotaley' etc.

vii. Emergence from the same source

Linguistic studies of the Bantu and West African languages have established that the ancestors of modern Bantu speakers originated from the Nigeria-Cameroon border area. The study of related languages may show that they emerged from the same source, probably a proto-language called 'Kwa'.

viii. Related languages

Through the study of linguistics, historians can establish whether speakers of closely-related languages have a common root e.g. Ga and Adangbe, Wali and Dagari; Ewe and Fon; Fante and Bono; and Dagomba and Mossi. Professor Abena Dolphyne of the University of Ghana

has studied Akan languages of the Asante, Fante and Bono. She concluded that the Bono language is more related to the Fante language than any of the two of the Asante language. This is confirmed by the oral tradition of the Fante that they stayed at Takyiman before moving to their present home.

DEMERTIS/LIMITATIONS OF LINGUISTICS

i. Difficult to study

It is difficult to study and analyze a particular language if the researcher does not have fore knowledge about it. Linguistics is such a complex study that there is very little unanimity or agreement among even the linguists themselves on their conclusions.

ii. Changes may not help

Linguistics cannot clearly point out changes in language over a period of time. This can lead to misrepresentation, loss or distortion of reality in history, thus making it very difficult to know the true origins or events needed by the writer.

iii. Less developed in Africa

Linguistics fell short in reconstruction of African history, because as a discipline it is less developed in Africa. Hence, it does not contribute very much like other sources in the writing of African history. That notwithstanding, in recent times, linguists in USA and elsewhere are researching on African history.

iv. Rely on other sources

Linguistics in most cases, the historian has to largely rely on the other sources for validation and collaboration of information obtained.

v. Coincidence in word usage

Some conclusions drawn by linguists based on words similarities may be sheer coincidence. In such cases, finding conclusive evidence remains difficult.

ETHNOGRAPHY/ETHNOLOGY AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Ethnography is the study of present-day social institutions as well as the crafts and artistic skills of people. Example is the collaboration of festivals, the process of making pottery, beads, weaving, construction etc.

ADVANTAGES/IMPORTANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHY

i. Understand the Present Day Technology

The conclusions drawn from the study and examination of these institutions and artefacts in examination of these institutions and artefacts in their present form help towards fully understanding and explain the past's influence on the formation of present skills/techniques.

ii. Understand the Past

The conclusions drawn from the study and examination of these institutions and artefacts in examination of these institutions and artefacts in their present form help to fully understand and explain the past.

iii. Study Festivals

Ethnography provides a useful opportunity to study Africa rituals and festivals which are mainly re-enactment of historical event (for example, the performance of the warriors during the Egungun festival of the Yoruba). Also, if the performance by the Alaketu (ruler of Ketu) during his installation demonstrate a play-back of the experiences of the first Alaketu in establishing Ketu state. Similarly, among the Ewes the Hogbetsotso festival is celebrated annually to commemorate their exodus and liberation from the tyrannical rule of Togbui Agorkoli I of Notsie.

DEMERITS OF ETHNOGRAPHY

i. Not easy to get meanings

One of the defects of ethnography is the study of present day social institution does not give the exact meanings to some traditional practices. The fast modernization and westernization of our traditional values may have swept away some important aspect of our cultural heritage.

ii. Tracing ancestry

Africans are able through ethnography to trace their ancestry or record some important events like Homowo, Hogbetsotso, Egungun festival.

iii. Influence of religions

Introduction of Christianity and Islam into African traditional society have slighted concentration in the celebration of traditional festivals and rites. Instead, there is more celebration of Christmas, Easter, Eid-il-fitr among others

NUMISMATICS AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Numismatics is the study of coins. This study helps us to know where the coins were minted and found.

i. Advanced economy

Numismatics studies has proved that Africans had an advanced economy in minting of coins. Numismatics throws light on trade contacts between people. For an example the discovery of 240 coins at Kilwa on the East African Coast show that from the 13th century AD, the sultans of Kilwa had their own mint.

ii. Accurate date

Numismatic gives accurate dates, names, places and events. For example the king list of Kilwa came to light when the 240 coins were discovered. It showed the sultans of the Swahili Coast.

iii. Reliable

Discovered coins can be seen, felt or touched, makes history live, or more interesting or reliable.

iv. High level of civilization

Numismatics shows the level of civilization to the people using coins. For instance, by the 13th century AD, the Sultans of the East African Coast had their own mint of coins for producing their coins for trade and other purposes. Also, gold weights represented the means of determining quantities of gold in Akan society where gold dust was the normal currency. The value of gold to be used in a money transaction was assessed by weights.

v. Political dominance

Numismatics shows the political dominance in societies using coins. During the colonial rule, Ghana's currency had the figure and name of the British crown.

vi. Preservation for longer periods.

Numismatics unlike the other artifacts, a coin can be preserved for a relatively longer period.

vii. Trade links

Through the activities of numismatics, it is known that as far back as the 9th and 10th centuries AD, the people of East Africa and China had established trading links.

DEMERITS OF NUMISMATICS

i. Gives limited information

Numismatics gives limited information in the story it tells. It may only identify a ruling class in the society engaged in trading activity who used the coin. This makes numismatics handicapped in tracing the other aspects of cultural lives of the user societies.

ii. Rely on other sources

Without the consultation of other sources like archeology and oral tradition, numismatics may somehow be impotent in revealing the entire cultural history of a society. This is also because not all pre-historic societies minted and used coins.

ETHNOBOTANY AND ETHNOZOOLOGY AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Ethnobotany is the scientific study of ancient remains of plants which are termed flora. Ethnozoology is the scientific study of animal remains from the past which are called fauna. These studies help to trace the origins of plants and the animals our ancestors fed on and exploited in the past. It is through such studies that crops are classified as indigenous and non-indigenous.

ADVANTAGES OF ETHNOBOTANY AND ETHNOZOOLOGY

i. Advance in Agriculture

Through the study of ethnobotany, it has been established that, Africans were advanced in agriculture. For example ethnobotany has revealed that, the (Dahomey Gap) in modern Benin in West African coastal forest belt is the cradle of yam cultivation. Also animals like West African dwarf goat, pigs, cattle, dogs, cats and guinea fowl are all indigenous to Africa.

ii. Contacts of people

Ethnobotany shows the interrelationships or contacts among peoples and the presence of some crops and fruits like guava, tangerine, mango, avocado pear and pineapple are known to have European origins. It has been observed that, the Bantu had for a long time relied on banana as a food source and therefore it has been suggested that the spread of banana to other parts of Africa had depended to a large extent on the migration of the Bantu.

iii. Determines settlement of people

Ethnobotany and ethnozoology help to locate settlement of people. Certain plants and animals determine settlement of people since generation after generation has used them as staple foods and diets.

iv. Dating events

The study of ethnobotany and ethnozoology has helped in dating events in the society.

v. Tree-ring dating

Ethnobotany has helped historians through the use of tree-ring dating method. It is the method used to date pieces of wood that are found in excavations to determine the ages of their use.

DEMERITS OF ETHNOBOTANY AND ETHNOZOOLOGY

i. Inaccuracy in prediction

The information about crop and animals being indigenous or non-indigenous may not be accurate. This is because weather and climatic conditions as well as the duration of the crop in a particular area might be so long that there is the likelihood of inaccurate prediction.

ii. Generalizations

A remarkable problem associated with ethnobotany is generalization. For instance it is established that Tetteh Quarshie brought cocoa to Ghana from Fernando Po but another source have it that the Basel missionaries brought cocoa from Surinam before Tetteh Quarshie. It will be incorrect to generalize that cocoa came to Ghana from Fernando Po or Surinam because the climatic condition in these places are the same.

iii. Depend on the Other Sources

Ethnobotanist must work in conjunction with other sources of writing African history before they can establish the validity or otherwise of their find. Without this inter-disciplinary approach, ethnobotany will be impotent.

ETHNOMUSICOLOGY AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Ethnomusicology is the scientific study of music (musicology) which focuses on the study of music forms in their cultural perspective. It deals with the role of music in the cultural history of a group of people, and how the formal structures of music evolve in different historical contexts.

i. Confirmation of Events

Ethnomusicology confirms and supports events of history. Most folk songs and ancient musical forms usually make reference to important socio-economic events and political events in the life of the people who composed and sang them. E.g. the Asafo songs of the Fante make references to the exploits of their three warlords which included, Obunumakoma, Odapagyan and Oson. Also, the Akyem Abuakwa's warrior Queenmother Dokuah's role in the courageous woman who fights with the gun. This describes Dokuah's contribution to the Akyem Abuakwa state. Similarly, in Mande peoples, the epic of Sunjata Keita recounts the formation of the empire of Mali.

ii. Storehouse of Information

It is also a storehouse of historical information in the form of drums, horn, music, dirges and praise songs. For instance, during the Damba festival of the Dagombas, they play drums that give messages about Toharjie-the great warrior who led them to their present settlements. Drums are one of the Africa's great living books.

iii. Changes Occur In Music

The study of the changes that occur in people's musical forms over a period of time is also another source of history, for example, a study of the religious songs of the Ga has revealed that the music as well as the song belongs to an older and different ethnic group. This supports the claim of Guan oral tradition that they occupied the highlands of the Ga state prior to the arrival of the Ga. Moreover the change in African musical instruments in the New World has given much information about diaspora history.

DEMERITS OF ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

i. Lyrics authenticity

One major defects of ethnomusicology is the authenticity of the text or lyrics the song conveyed.

ii. Difficult to trace the origins of songs

Another shortfall of ethnomusicology is that there is no African culture ever developed a notational system for its organization of culturally defined musical sound. This implies there is little hope in hearing African music with any accuracy of tracing the actual sound of music to any substantial time-depth.

ARTS FORMS/ARTS HISTORY AS A FORM OF AFRICAN HISTORY.

Art history is the study of art forms such as engravings, paintings, carvings and sculpture on stone surface, tombs, slabs or walls of caves, palaces and shrines.

ADVANTAGES OF ART HISTORY

i. Activities of human beings

Arts forms or history helps to discover the economic activities, religious beliefs, culture and political power a group of people had in the past. For instance, the art works found in the Tassili Caves suggest that the dry areas of North Africa might not have been as dry in the past as they are today.

ii. Eating Habits

Paintings of food crops found in the tombs in the Sahara give impressions that the early inhabitants of these region might have relied on grains as food source. This helps historians to know and determine the eating habits and occupations of the early inhabitants of the Saharan regions.

iii. Life in the Sahara

Another painting found in the rocks of the Sahara might have shown that the Sahara had at a point in time harbored aquatic animals. This has given the impression that the Sahara has always not being as dry as it is today.

DEMERITS OF ARTS HISTORY

i. Difficult to get

Rock paintings which are peculiar to art forms are not common on the African continent especially in sub-Saharan Africa. This is due to the fact that painting was restricted to perishable surfaces such as textiles, wood, house walls among other therefore could not survive the high humid climatic conditions of the environment.

ii. Depend on other sources

The art historian encounters the problem of dating their artistic find. For that matter they resorts to the archeologist in dating things such pre-historic art.

SEROLOGY AS A SOURCE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

Serology is the branch of medicine concerned with the study of blood types. It deals with the blood serum components that protect the blood against diseases.

ADVANTAGES OF SEROLOGY

i. Human blood varies in composition from one person to another in the sense that some genes present in some people in some people are absent in others. For that matter people can be categorized according to their blood groups. It is therefore possible that adequate knowledge of a predominant blood type in another area or region should be able to establish some kind of hypothesis that the people of region A must have formed part of region B.

ii. Belonging to a source

Studies in the frequency of the sickle cell should be able to give the clue that, people belong to a particular source. A very good example of how the studies in the frequency in sickle cell can help historical research could be found in Windward Coast in Liberia. In this region, the Kru people are almost devoid of the sickle cell trait. Yet it is very common among the neighboring people. This confirms the fact that the Kru has been a close community who did not intermarry with their neighbors.

METHODS USED IN GATHERING/COLLECTING INFORMATION FOR THE WRITING OF AFRICAN HISTORY

To collect data for the reconstruction of African history, the historian must not rely solely on written sources or non-documentary sources but rather the following methods must be employed to check biases, prejudices and exaggerations.

i. Personal enquiry and interview

One method of gathering information from non-documentary sources of African history is interviewing of knowledgeable persons about the culture of a particular community. This is to say that the historian must interview people about the information of the past such as eye-witnesses or traditional historians like court linguists, older court officials and the elderly. The historian can record these interviews and later play, write out and analyze the information given.

ii. Inter-disciplinary approach

Another method of gathering information about African history is the interdisciplinary approach. Cooperation with scholars in other fields of knowledge gives information for African history. The historian has to cooperate with specialists like the linguists, archeologists, botanists, ethnographers among others to obtain materials that can be used to reconstruct African history. The researcher works together with these scholars to gather important information to draw valid conclusions.

Reviewing

In writing African history, one can use the review method to get information by reviewing the written sources such as books, newspapers, journals, broadcasts, diaries, manifestoes, and private letters among others, by reviewing the research through written sources both primary and secondary for information which they examine and cross-check. Even though these written records have shortcomings and inadequacies, they can be reviewed by the historian to ensure an accurate reflection of the past. This helps to produce unbiased history which is backed by evidence.

Questionnaire

To get the best results of collecting data for writing African history, a carefully composed questionnaire should be used which must cover the political, economic, social, religious and technological aspects. In this situation, a series of well-structured questions are given out to persons who know about the past to solicit for information. The responses to these questions are gathered and analyzed by the historian in order to draw a reasonable conclusion.

Personal Observation and Records

Through personal observation by visiting places of historical importance like slave sites, castles, forts etc. and personally recording events like festivals, funerals and the like, important findings can result in the collection of data for writing African history. Such details are necessary since they constitute first-hand information as the events happened before their own eyes i.e. eye witness account. Such accounts can be compared and questions are asked on them to get a reliable view of what actually happened in the past.

Reliability of the sources for the study of African history

Despite the fact that written and unwritten sources of African history have shortfalls, we can still describe them as adequately reliable, since the work of a historian is based on historical methods where they use scientific methods in drawing conclusions. Written records of history have a high level of precision and very reliable. All the documentary sources e.g. newspapers, personal letters, diaries, journals, manifestoes etc. can be reviewed and cross checked for a fair assessment of the past. This process helps to get rid of prejudices, biases to ensure truthfulness. By putting written records side by side with other forms of evidence, the historian can establish an objective conclusion.

The reliability of unwritten sources of history cannot be underestimated since they all involve scientific methods in carrying out researches. For instance, the Ghanaian linguist, Professor Abena Dolphyne undertook a research on the Bono, Asante and Fante people and arrived at an important conclusion. She found out that the Asante language is less related to the Fante. Also, archeology which is our main source of information on African history uses scientific methods like reconnaissance, stratification, radiocarbon and potassium argon dating methods and data analysis. These methods help archeologists to come to accurate and reliable conclusions significant for historical writing. Reconnaissance involves the process of discovering sites and plotting them for digging.

However, archeology as a non-documentary source of African history has some flaws. It is an unfortunate fact that there is no conscious system of preserving archeological knowledge. For that matter what archaeologists come across may be an accidental preservation. In this case, one goes into archeological excavation with the idea of acquiring some knowledge but relying on chance if not luck. Again, archaeological remains are subjected to wear and tear, weathering, and disfigurement and therefore are likely to present difficulty in the historians' attempt to derive very reliable information from them. The process of radio-carbon dating is very expensive and that constitutes a hindrance to effective research.

Moreover, oral tradition is full of exaggeration on establishment of information to suit the narrator's interest. Many a time, they tend to present history in a way that would not only exclude portions that do not meet their interest but worse of all, it might not be able to give specific details due to genuine loss in memory. Again, oral tradition tends to put so much emphasis on personalities and events like wars, whilst playing down on social and economic aspects of the past. With this, information becomes very scanty to the disadvantage of scholarship and posterity.

In conclusion, we can deduce that both documentary and non-documentary evidence must be used to complement each other in the writing of African history. Since both are the work of human beings, one cannot be more reliable than the other since people tend to be subjective, biased and impressionistic.

Samuel Adu-Gyamfi And Benjamin Kye Ampadu

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