

Draft paper for the Africa Knows! Conference; panel D19: Disciplinary Trends in African History

Author: Casper Andersen, PhD, Associate Professor in History of Ideas, University of Aarhus, Denmark.

Title: “Making the archival watch dog bark’: The UNESCO archive of African oral tradition”

Abstract: The paper discusses UNESCO scholarly engagements with African Oral Tradition, which began in the mid-1960s. Concerned with preserving oral traditions of the past UNESCOs work was, nonetheless, obsessed with making a truly *modern* archive. I argue that the archive project displayed a tension between on the one hand a commitment to promote and vindicate African ways of knowing about the past and on the other a high modernist drive to build a scientific archive that would resonate in international scientific circles. The UNESCO engagements with African oral tradition, therefore, offers a fresh perspective on longstanding tensions between Afrocentric agendas and universalist aspirations in African history.

Keywords: oral tradition, technology, archives, historiography, Hampaté Ba,

Core Text: Making the archival watch dog bark’: The UNESCO archive of African oral tradition (Max 3600 words)

For more than six decades UNESCO has played an important role in scholarly engagements with African oral traditions. UNESCO has been involved in the physical collection and archiving of oral

testimonies, in the establishing methodological foundations for the study of oral traditions and in the training of scientific experts in African oral traditions. UNESCO has also played a seminal role in programs which have aimed to employ African oral traditions in educational contexts from primary schooling to university level and in the dissemination of African oral traditions in mass media across the continent.

Very little research has been done on UNESCO's role in relation to the study and use of African oral traditions. In this exploratory paper – written under the limitations of the ongoing pandemic – I will discuss some key themes structured around key *people* and key *technologies* and I will conclude with some reflections on UNESCO's engagements with African oral traditions informed by the so-called archival turn in the history of knowledge.

Background

UNESCO engagements with the study of African oral traditions gained momentum during the 1960s. There were at least three reasons for this. Firstly, oral traditions provided an important part of the source base for UNESCO's General History of Africa project launched in the early 1960s to produce a new history of Africa written from “within” – that is a history by Africans for Africans based on African sources and epistemologies. Secondly, many academics, intellectuals and bureaucrats affiliated with UNESCO regarded the oral traditions as a repository of the cultural past of the continent and therefore as a key source for nation building and identity formation in (newly) independent African states. Thirdly, material drawn from oral tradition was regarded as essential to several fields of study besides history including linguistics, anthropology and ecology among others (UNESCO 1974, 5-6).

People

The most well-known scholar – at least in Western academia – to embody the connection between UNESCO and the study of African oral traditions is probably Jan Vansina. Vansina was affiliated with UNESCO for several decades and played an important part in the UNESCO's *General History of Africa* project. In his work to develop rigorous methods for the use of oral tradition in historical scholarship Vansina emphasised the universal nature of oral testimony. In seminal work *Oral Tradition as History* he noted that "All human thought and memory operates in the same way everywhere and at all times... Oral traditions have now been studied in most parts of the world and allow us to confidently state that we are dealing with general conditions" (Vansina 1985, 17).

However, among historians of Africa with UNESCO affiliations the more widely held view was that oral traditions were essential and to some extent a specific characteristic of African ways of knowing. This was the view of the Malian intellectual and historian Amadou Hampâté Bá, whose long affiliation with UNESCO included a membership of UNESCO's executive board from 1962-1970. Writing in the UNESCO Courier in 1974 Bá insisted that "when we speak of African tradition or history, we mean oral tradition; and no attempt at penetrating the history and spirit of African people is valid unless it relies on that heritage of knowledge" (Ba 1974, 45). Bá is associated with the saying that "In Africa, when an old man dies, a library disappears" which he used in 1962 at a meeting concerning the rescue of the Nubian monuments threatened by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. His point was that the last generation of imminent 'African illiterate scholars - the great repositories of ancestral African lore' – would soon disappear (Diallo 1991, 13). According to Bá oral tradition therefore constituted a heritage in even more urgent need of rescue than built monuments threatened by any modernizing dam.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, African historians were keen to draw attention to what they regarded as an imminent threat to the core archive of Africa. One of the editors of UNESCO's General History of Africa Joseph Ki-Zerbo noted that besides the two other major sources of African history (written documents and archaeology) "oral tradition takes its place as a real living museum, conservator, and transmitter of the social and cultural creations of peoples purported to have no written records" and he emphasized also that this fragile source base was disappearing fast:

This spoken history is the very frail thread by which to trace our way back through the dark corridors of the labyrinth of time. Its custodians are hoary-headed old men with cracked voice, whose memory are often dim...They are the last remaining islets in a landscape that was once imposing and coherent but which is now eroded, flattened and thrown into disorder by the sharp waves of modernism. Latter-day fossils! When one of them dies, a fibre of Ariadne's thread is broken, a fragment of the landscape literally disappears underground. (Ki-Zerbo, the UNESCO Courier 1981)

It makes sense to think of this as a form of rescue archaeology of the oral traditions.

The politics of history in the vindication of oral tradition were also clear. UNESCO's work on African history generally aimed to challenge disparaging claims about Africa's past. During the 1960s and beyond UNESCO publications, reports and articles routinely drew attention to the derogatory assertions by G.W. F. Hegel and Hugh Trevor-Roper among others that Africa was not part of history – and they insisted on the need for a new UN-backed engagement with the history of the continent.

Importantly, eurocentric scholarship had relegated Africa to the “threshold of history” based on racial *and* disciplinary biases which privileged the written word. Oral tradition was key to dismantling this distorted and colonizing view on the study of the past. In 1985, in the *UNESCO The Courier*, the Kenyan historian Ali Mazrui expressed this widely held agenda eloquently. He noted that as long as written archives were considered the exclusive basis for historical research, the African continent would remain marginalized and largely silent about its past. Mazrui likened the situation to the Sherlock Holmes story in which the identity of the intruder is revealed negatively by the watch dog that did *not* bark (thus revealing that the culprit was the person the dog knew beforehand). The dog’s silence was the devastating piece of evidence. Similarly, in African history – because written sources had been regarded as the only archive for history, the (apparent) silence of the continent had been taken as devastating evidence that Africa had no history and no internally driven development. At crucial moments the African archival dog had failed to bark – but only because until recently Africa’s oral traditions had not been properly archived. It was, Mazrui concluded, the ongoing task of UNESCO to establish and vindicate this archive and, thus, make the dog bark loud and clear (Mazrui 1985).

Historians occupied a central role among these debates and voices in UNESCO. But they were never alone. One example is the French engineer, anthropologist and film maker Jean Rouch who played a central role in UNESCOs oral tradition projects from the beginning....

The involvement of people with diverse disciplinary background seems to be more pronounced after 1972 when the history-driven activities undertaken by UNESCO with regard to oral tradition was included in the organisation’s new work on cultural rights within the human rights framework.

Within this framework the systematic study of African oral traditions was enrolled as instruments in UNESCO's programmes of life-long education (UNESCO ten year for the study of African oral tradition 1972). Substantial resources from the educational sector of the organisation flowed into this strategic priority which also involved a shift in emphasis from academic scholarship to dissemination and didactics in the organizations' engagements with oral traditions (an issue to which we shall return below – [not included here])

Technologies

Much has been written about the philosophical and theoretical implications involved in the study of oral traditions and also on its ability to transform and challenge ideas about Africa as a continent without a past. Less attention has been paid to the institutional infrastructures, technological hardware and classification nomenclatures that were regarded as essential for building a credible and accessible archive of African oral traditions. Recent scholarship in history of knowledge and in historical epistemology has demonstrated how much can be gained from scrutinizing these mundane practices of knowledge production (Daston and Lunbeck *Histories of observation* 2011; Daston ed. *Science in the Archives* 2017). To exemplify we may begin by historicising recording techniques. In the 1960s the experts in the UNESCO supported *Centre for Research and Documentation of Oral Traditions* in Niamey in Niger recommended the so-called two recorders method as the superior procedure for selecting what oral testimonies should go into the archive and how recordings should be standardized. The basic feature of the method was to record a transcribed text on one tape recorder and then playback the original text, sentence by sentence, in the presence of the informant. These passages were then to be re-recorded on the second tape recorder followed by necessary explanation of "obscured meanings", place names and etc. By using

this method the archivist of oral traditions would end up with the original text supplemented by explanatory commentaries collected in the field (UNESCO 1967).

This was just one (contested) aspect in a process of disciplining field experts and standardizing the practices that would ensure the rescue of fading oral traditions. In the course of the 1960s the use of audio-visual recording equipment created even more complex methods for recording oral testimonies and spurred more question about the extent to which oral traditions and performances were transformed or distorted in the very process of recording them on modern equipment brought into the villages (See e.g. Jean Rouch 1975).

The point of all this is that we need to historicise these epistemic practices. As Anke te Heesen as argued recently *Interviews [for oral history] have a history*. We have in our hands a genre whose various formats and narratives must be studied in their specific historical context” (Te Heesen, 2020, 96). Concerned with preserving oral traditions of the past UNESCO experts were keen to make a truly *modern* archive with fixed scientific typologies to cover all African oral traditions before they would disappear. Tentatively we may suggest that the practices reveal to a basic tension between on the one hand a commitment to promote and vindicate African ways of knowing about the past and on the other hand a high modernist drive to build a scientific archive that would resonate in international scientific circles. In the explicit agenda to decolonise historiography complicated relations very produced with ‘the cognitive empire’, to use the significant concept employed by Professor Gatsheni in his inspiring keynote at this conference.

An archive

Recent work by Loraine Daston and others has highlighted some of the key roles archives play in knowledge production in a broad range of disciplinary contexts through history and into the present

(Daston ed. 2017). Far from being dead repositories of knowledge, archives are integral to knowledge production and studying how they are made and used can provide windows to issues such as perceptions of temporality and professional identities.

This is also notable in the drive to create an archive of African oral tradition. In 1969 the American historian Phillip D. Curtin reflected on the role of the historian of Africa in a situation where they would be “the last generation with access to the present-day wealth of oral traditions”. He argued that the change was profound: “By habit and training the historian is an ‘archives using animal’, he wrote but in the current situation “the historian changes from his [sic] old role as an archive user; he becomes instead ‘an archives creator’” (Curtin 1969, 45).

For Curtin the ethos of “salvage archiving” was a challenge to an established professional identity as an historian. In this respect some of the African scholars in UNESCO were much more profoundly sceptical of what could in fact be recorded, put down in writing and archived. Bá quoted the Sufi sage Tierno Bokar that “knowledge is one thing and knowledge is another. Writing is a photograph of knowledge, not knowledge itself. Knowledge is a light that is in man” (Ba 1981, 166). Yet, in spite the scepticism Bá would nonetheless devote his time and energy to archive the traditions with the use most techniques. How are we to account for this? For now, I would like to end by noting the intriguing connection that existed between the oft-expressed sense that the oral traditions were rapidly disappearing for good – “killed by the sharp waves of modernism” in Ki-Zerbo’s words – and the hope that modern recoding equipment would at least salvage parts of the oral traditions at the last moment and archive them for the future. At stake here may be an idea of modernity and its consequences that we – following Fred Cooper’s advice – could gain much from historicizing and treating as an actor’s category.