

**Beyond K.O. Dike et al:
Canonical Works on Oral Historiography of Africa and the Challenge for
Contemporary Social Science Research**

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The use of oral literature for writing African history was popularized by the Arabs. Local Islamic scholars in the old Songhay, Kanem-Borno empires and Hausa states produced most of their historical works, written in Arabic, using oral data obtained from diverse sources. Similar thing took place in some parts of East Africa where the Islamic tradition was fused with the local Bantu identity to forge the Swahili culture. Oral historiography was given further boost in nineteenth century following the introduction of western education to many parts of the African continent. The first generation of educated elite in the continent was disturbed by the way western writers misrepresented African past and traditions. The most disturbing was the claim that Africans did not have any past beyond the activities of European explorers and Christian missionaries. To correct this wrong impression about Africa, some African men of letters [who attended missionary schools] started to record traditional African histories. The goal was basically to show that Africa had rich cultural pasts. These writers included Samuel Johnson, Jacob Egharevba, Akiga Sai and others from Nigeria; Carl Reindorf of Ghana; Hampate-Ba of Mali; Boubou Hama of Niger; Sir Apolo Kagwa and Nyakatura of Uganda. Many of them wrote in local languages.

The need to write African history from the inside became a nationalist issue between the late 1950s and 1960s. This was championed by some African scholars, most especially Professors K.O. Dike and Saburi Biobaku of Nigeria, and B. Ogot of Kenya. Each of them advocated the use of oral sources for writing African history and took the lead in doing this. Their arguments and positions were supported and further reinforced by the theoretical and practical works of Professor Jan Vansina.

Historical scholarship is at its lowest ebb in Africa today. Oral historiography is now given better boost in America and Europe than in Africa. Students of history in Africa now rely more on documentary evidence for writing their history. What emerge from this is statist history which prevents “commoners” from having a say in the historical reconstruction of their society. This prevents us from understanding the root and nature of the purposeless political leadership, mass corruption, civil disorder, and other social vices that militate against contemporary African development.

The first generation of African historians successfully used oral historiography to prove that Africans had a glorious cultural past. Contemporary African historians have the responsibility for proving that many of the development problems we have in Africa today are not historically African. This requires giving better attention to the study of oral literature. My paper will identify how oral historiography can be given better boost in African universities and also underscore what the other social scientists in the continent have to benefit from relying more on oral literature in their data collection and analysis.