

FOLKLORES AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Dr. Yusuf Abdullahi

Department of History and Strategic Studies
Federal University, Dutsin-Ma
Katsina State
Nigeria

yabdullahi@fudutsinma.edu.ng/yusufmahuta@gmail.com

Mamman Mohammed

Department of History and Strategic Studies
Federal University, Dutsin-Ma
Katsina State
Nigeria

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Abstract

In most cases, folklores have been identified to serve as means of entertainment and leisure in various African communities. The intellectual role of folklores especially on its relevance to the study of African history is often not given much attention. The essence of this paper is to discuss the relevance of folklores in the reconstruction, study and understanding of African history. Although history deals with facts while folklores deal with imagination and stories, they influence one another. Folklores, as this paper argues, are derived from the environmental, social, economic and political institutions of real life situations and thus provide the basis for understanding societal superstructures. Using largely secondary sources, this paper further explains that, folklores constitute another significant aspect of oral tradition, though seems to be less utilized by historians. This work adopted descriptive methodology of research. The study of folklores, as this paper shows, helps our understanding of traditions and cultures and relationship between people and their natural environment over a period of time. The paper finally calls for the recovery, preservation and utilization of folklores in historical writing.

Keywords: Folklores, History, Understanding and African Societies

Introduction

Before the breakthrough of Jan Vansina on oral tradition, Africa was looked upon by European writers as a continent without history.¹ Their reason was mainly on the assumption that history can only be preserved in Western form of writings. Vansina and subsequent Africanist historians pointed at the validity of oral tradition, its classification and ways of accessing it and so on. Some forms of oral source which are significant in understanding peoples' thoughts and their socio-economic and political settings include myths, legends, proverbs and songs. However, all these are also found within the spectrum of folklores. African folklores contain and disseminate knowledge not only on entertainment but also on local environment, economy, politics, including peoples' thoughts and belief systems. This paper therefore examines the relevance of folklores in the reconstruction and understanding of African history.

The Nature of African folklores

Folklore is oral history that is preserved by people, consisting of traditions belonging to a specific culture. These traditions usually include songs and music, stories, history, legends, myths, magic, divination, witchcraft, traditions of origins, festivals, customs, games, and dances; cookery and costume, proverbs, jokes, riddles, music and song and so forth.² This explains why folklore is much broader than any form of oral tradition. Folklore is passed down from generation to generation mostly in verbal form and is kept active by the people in the culture, though folklorists have now been documenting folklores in institutions of learning.

¹ . H.M. Maishanu, *Five Centuries of Historical Writings in Hausaland and Borno 1500-2000 A.D*, Lagos, Longman, 2007

² J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Folklore is an ancient form of recollections and stories. In fact, oral forms such as myth, songs legend and popular history are all embedded in it. It is a general term for the verbal, spiritual, and material aspects of any culture. People sharing a culture may have in common an occupation, language, ethnicity, age, or geographical location. This body of tradition is preserved in memory and passed on from generation to generation, with constant variations shaped by human recollection, immediate need or purpose, and degree of individual talent. Rather than dying out, it is still part of the learning of all groups from family units to nations, albeit changing in form and function.

Folklores contain many elements as myth, but wider than it. They offer explanation of the peculiarities in animal and human behaviours. It also expresses morals and characters worthy of emulations. Folklores are generally told at certain appointed time mainly at night by good story-tellers, usually for entertainments.³ This explains why they are mainly told at the time of leisure. With regards to locations where folklores are narrated, African societies differ as well. In some villages of Algeria and Libya, folklores are narrated mostly in village squares. The reason being that, folklores are not privileged information but rather made for public consumption. In Benin city of West Africa, it is mostly told at the *Itum*, a central place of the house.⁴ Folklores appear to have authentication by the presence of gods and heroes. Prominent issues in African folklores are presence of animals such as monkey, spider, tortoise, lion, hyena, giraffe and so on. Usually, animals are used to depict human characteristics and

³ . D. Henige, "Oral Tradition as a Means of Reconstructing the Past," in J. E. Philips, ed., *Writing African History*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2005, pp. 169-173

⁴ . J. Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History...*

therefore convey messages to audience.⁵ There were occasions whereby African folklores share certain similarities such as the presence of Tortoise in the folklores of Yoruba, Edo and Igbo. Spider was also common in the folklores of Hausa, Akan and Wolof; while Hyena and Hare were present in the folklores of Kikuyu.

Significance of Folklores in the History of Africa

Folklores have a place in history since oral source is especially recognized as a source of historical reconstruction. Stories are normally shaped by people's convention. It is part of the duty of historians to uncover the logic of the humans of the past, to understand the meaning they gave to their lives and the reasons why they did what they did. Folklorists never work in a vacuum. Their creators had meanings they want to give. Folklore allows people to give meaning to their lives and their surroundings. Because every culture has different historical backgrounds and traditions, folklore therefore, has a different definition to each culture. Therefore, Folklore studies have always focused on interrelationships between language, literature, philosophy and history. Historians focused on the use of folklores in order to understand the past and sometimes to shape the present.

Folklores contain, indicate and preserved richness of language, culture, thoughts and ideas of particular society, through folk songs, proverbs and riddles. Folklores preserve proverbs, songs and music, important sources in historical reconstruction. Some of the Yoruba proverbs derived from the wisdom of tortoise in folklores include; "what follows six is more than seven" (*o hun tio wa leyin offaa oju oje lo.*); "a river that forgets its source dries up";

⁵. Some titles of folklores in South Africa include: *The tiger, the ram and the jackal; The lion and the jackal; A jackal and a wolf; The lioness and the ostrich; Elephant and tortoise; and The judgment of baboon.*

“character is beauty.”⁶ Folklores allow people to give meaning to their lives and their surroundings. The reason is that, folklores originate out of peoples’ perception of their immediate environment and world outlook in general. Every culture has different historical background and traditions. Therefore, if we understand the circumstances upon which such folklores were created and situated, we may be able to understand substantial part of peoples’ past, culture and civilization. In its cultural depths, folklores contain expression of peoples’ thought or belief system. It therefore helps us to write the African history in African contexts without recourse to the western sense of historiography. Folklore has come to be regarded as part of the human learning process and an important source of information about the history of human life.

African societies preserved their history in various ways. Before the emergence of state, especially before the introduction of Islam and spread of the knowledge of writing, African societies preserved their history in oral form, a significant part of which was in the form of folklores. In Hausaland for instance, as Maishanu indicated, *Maigida* was the political as well as religious head. He was also the head of the family customs, including its tradition of origin. In pre-literary societies, most of these were preserved in folklores. The history of state formation and rise of centralized societies is mostly associated with domination of one society over another as obtained for instance with the domination of Saifawa over the Ngalage, the Kangu, the Kaburi, the Tomagra and so on.⁷ While written literatures captured most of the

⁶ D.L. Badiejo, “Methodologies in Yoruba Oral History,” in J. E. Philips, ed., *Writing African History*, ... pp. 348-361

⁷ H.M. Maishanu, *Five Centuries of Historical Writings in Hausaland and Borno 1500-2000*, Lagos Longman, 2007, p. 17

history of the dominant nationalities, the history of dominated or ethnic minorities was left largely unwritten. Therefore, the history of the subalterns and small-scale societies were preserved mostly in folklores, legend, and in various forms of traditions of origins.

Folklores provide a base upon which historians apply multidisciplinary approach in the study of history. Within it include botany, zoology and geography. It also preserved the richness of language and enables us to utilize linguistic evidence in historical reconstruction. Folklore tells us about traditional sovereigns, rulers, griots, religious potentates, special artisans, carvers, as well as musicians. Folklore as a creative activity and as a body of unscrutinized or unverifiable assertions and beliefs has not vanished. All the elements of society are reflected in folklore and folk literature such as the beliefs of society, language, philosophy, dance, art, music, traditions, manners and customs that originate from the accumulated experience of a society.⁸ Their contents may be used primarily as entertainment reading, but as cultural material that will contribute to the shaping of contemporary identity. Therefore, it helps mobilize and operate the symbolic activities of the mind that people use to construct meaning not only of the external world around them but also of themselves, through reflection.

The folklores, though seeming at first as completely distant from reality, are often experiential in nature, are clothed continuously with realistic details, and its tales ultimately substantiate the lifestyle and the moral codes of the community. They incorporate the past to the present as a source of useful knowledge. Narratives through folklores allow children to learn and identify

⁸ . B. J. Mason, *American Negro Folklore, Selections Depicting the Negro Culture*, New York, Quadrangle Books, 1968, p. 34

with situations and experiences such as conflicts between good and evils, and the difference between courage and cowardice. In folklores, stories help in showing how society views itself and views others, and also conveys their notions of justice, rights and obligations. Laziness, greed and selfishness are therefore portrayed as negatively as possible. While goodness, honesty and unity are depicted as important virtues which the heroes and heroines of folklores always use to prevail over their opponents or challenges. It will be interesting to note that folklore draws its subjects mostly from theology, geophysical phenomena, as well as cultural and historical happenings.⁹ The relationship, therefore, between history and folklores, is symbiotic.

Folklores have influence in the socio-economic lives of modern societies. In the olden days, folklores were handed down from generation to generation mostly in verbal form. However, nowadays, series of folklores have been documented in written form. In fact, they have been used in various radio and television programs, including film industries across the globe. In North African countries, particularly Algeria and Morocco, most of their festivals were derived from folklores. In Morocco, for instance, its modern festivals derived from folklores include *Awash*, *Ouais*, *Ait* and *Atta* among others. Similarly, in Algeria, folklores contained stories of dance and music which influence Algerians' fond of music.¹⁰ Most of the Algerian folklores were collected from the Berbers of Kabyle, a north-east region of Algeria. The folklores of

⁹. L. Lawrence, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Examples of Rich and Diverse Oral Culture Developed by Afro Americans*, Oxford, University Press, 1977, p. 57

¹⁰. Accessed at www.algeria.com/folklores

Berbers contain issues pertaining their thoughts, traditions, belief systems especially before the coming of Islam and the pattern of traditional economy.

Folklores contain moral lessons and also teach younger generations need for communal cooperation and sympathy as obtains in the Algerian folklore of *An Orphan and Moon*. It also gives us insight in the aspects of relations among human beings and relations between man and phenomenon that surround him including flora and fauna as obtained in the folklore of San (Bushmen) *on the praying mantis* and the folklore of Bambara *on the story of antelope*.¹¹ The reverence which the San give to praying mantis was through their folklores, that it was the praying mantis that gave them words and fire. The discovery of fire was an important development to San's predominant economic activity-hunting. Fire was used for iron smelting and in better preservation of meat. To the Bambara, it was antelope that taught them agriculture; thee cultivation of food and domestication of animals. How these became possible was not explained in such folklores. But it was clear that agriculture was important in human transition from hunting and gathering to sedentary life. It also afforded human being opportunities for craft production, division of labour, specialization, trade and, generally, development of human civilization.

The Kenyan folklores contain stories on the movement of peoples from highlands to grassland and lake regions. These series of movements, though unscientific as they were, contain issues of pull and push factors of migrations, name of some mountains, including rivers and lakes. Other aspects of such folklores indicate influence of spirits, and belief associated with natural

¹¹ . D. Alan and M. Wit, *An Anthology of Essays analyzing the major forms of Afro-American Folklore*, Prentice Hall, 1973, p. 38

objects such as rivers, streams, hills, trees and so on. Swahili of Tanzania tell folklores of Arabian origin.¹² This show us some aspects of relations between Arabs and peoples of East Africa. It tells us some aspects of the geographical environments upon which the peoples of East Africa found themselves. The Kikuyu folklores give us insight into their thoughts as we can see from the folklores of **Hare and Hyena**;

Hare; *Brother Hyena, may I give you something very sweet.*

Hyena; *yes, my very good friend... And the Hare have his sweetened finger (of honey) to the hyena to lick.*

Hyena; *Oh Hare my very good friend, do give me some more.*

Hare; *No, no, no you cannot eat more of this sweetness...*

Hyena; *But brother, where do you get such sweetness?*

Hare; *I get it from those mountains, Hare pointing at the white clouds. Once you eat this sweetness you should never pass out piss or shit because then the sweetness gets lost.*

Hyena; *Then what do people do so that they do not pass out piss or shit after they have eaten this sweetness?*

Hare; *Ah hyena that is very simple, they have their bottom sewn up.*

Hyena; *Yes, yes do sew them for me. And the Hare sewed the Hyena's bottom.¹³*

It can be observed that, when the Hare treats the Hyena like a stupid child, he passes a moral judgment on him. He exposes him as a foolish old man who, in normal circumstances, should be fortified with all the wisdom of the ancestors, instead of being obsessed with honeycombs.

¹². accessed at www.mythfolklore.net

¹³. "Kikuyu folklores," accessed at www.nzd.org

This also stresses the importance of wisdom over sheer physical prowess as indicated in the Kikuyu proverb “wisdom comes before strength.” Kikuyu valued intelligence and they liked diplomacy, discussion and democracy.¹⁴ Diplomacy was used, whenever necessary, in personal affairs such as marriage and also in grave issues such as war.

Similarly, among the Yoruba, tales of *Ijapa* (tortoise) are common.¹⁵ Among the Igbo, tales of *agu* (tiger), *mbe* (tortoise), and *ogwumagala* (chameleon) are also usually found.¹⁶ Moreover, in the Hausa folktales, mentions of *kura* (hyena), *biri* (monkey), *kada* (crocodile) and *gizo* (spider) are commonly found. In all these, lessons found include hard work, obedience, humility and morality.

In most of the African folklores, there were stories about kings, marriage, and economic activities such as fishing and hunting. These tell a lot about the reality of life among African societies especially as it was famous in the rise of empires and kingdoms and diverse pre-colonial economic activities. Other important topics covered by folklores include nature of environments, settlements, migrations and marriages. Moreover, folklores have been important means of identifying Africans in diaspora. Some Africans who were taken to America during the period of Trans-Atlantic slave trade went there with their own folklores as part of their oral

¹⁴ . Kikuyu folklores,” ...

¹⁵ . A.A. Sesan, “Yoruba Folktales, the New Media and Post-Modernism,” in Khazan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, April 2014. O. Omowoyela, *Tortoise Tales and Yoruba Ethos*, Research in African Literatures, vol. 20. no. 2, Special Issue on Popular Culture, Summer, 1989

¹⁶ . M. N. Nkoli and A.N. Okoye, “Igbo Folktales and Igbo Youths Development: The Need for Revitalization of Igbo Folktales,” in MMgbokigba, Journal of African Studies, vol. 6. no. 1, July, 2016

tradition. The *Hare and Hyena Tales* which were common in North America was brought there by the Wolof.¹⁷

Some criticisms of folklores

Folklores have also been criticized in various ways. First, such stories were not corroborated by other sources and thus remained unscientific. This informs why such stories are considered as either fiction or made merely for entertainment, especially, when most of the characters are represented by animals. Another problem is chronology. Most of the folklores contain no dating upon which such stories could be based. Besides, folklores mostly deal with general rather than specific issues. Some folklores have no mention of any specific location, settlement or person. Instead they commence as “once upon a time, there was a king, a hunter, etc.” there are also tendencies of forgetfulness, addition and subtraction as the folklores continued to be handed down from generation to generation.

Conclusion

Africa has diverse languages and cultures. Africans display their wisdom and talent not only in their various economic activities but also in the preservation and transmission of ideas across generations. Folklores have become important way through which Africans display their wisdom, language, and their understanding of natural environment and metaphysical world. Folklores therefore become important in historical reconstruction since historians are not to simply narrate the events but to show insight in peoples’ thought, belief system, and influence

¹⁷ . J. E. Holloway. “What Africa has given America” J. E. Philips, ed., *Writing African History*, ..., pp. 420-430

of natural environment in historical events. Although folklores are important, they have to be used with caution. Historians need to consider folklores not at their face value, but at the circumstances that inform their creation and lessons they contain.

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