

# How to Do Things with Words: African Oral History and Its Textual Incarnations

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The practice of oral history has been a foundational component of the discipline of African history since its postcolonial inception during the early 1960s. At the time, historians and newly independent African nation-states alike became concerned with recovering a usable past—a history that would demonstrate African agency and establish an autonomous sense of identity apart from the preceding period of European colonial rule. Depicting Africa’s pre-colonial past consequently became a central goal, although written evidence proved to be scarce. With the exception of Islamic states and communities, African societies did not use written languages. Collecting oral histories therefore became a necessity, and, indeed, the ubiquity and richness of African oral traditions that had developed over centuries in place of written records aided in this effort of reconstructing African history. Jan Vansina’s text *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology* (1965) was a crucial methodological intervention in this regard.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to prevailing perspectives of the time that emphasized the objectivity and fundamental importance of written records, Vansina argued for the equal value of oral sources of history. They too could be gleaned for verifiable factual content. Moreover, for Africa, such evidence offered new perspectives that challenged the distortions of Euro-centrism found in colonial documents. Vansina’s ideas accordingly helped

to revolutionize the practice of African history and defined its contours up to the present.

If, then, the practice of oral history has been a conventional aspect of African history for the past four decades, it has also proven to be an elusive methodology that has been difficult to generalize and, as a result, to teach. Early work of the 1960s that focused on the oral traditions of pre-colonial kingdoms has since intersected with concerns for twentieth-century “life histories.”<sup>2</sup> These studies have emphasized African resistance and agency vis-à-vis colonialism while examining non-state actors and

<sup>1</sup> Jan Vansina, *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology*, trans. by H. M. Wright, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965; see also Jan Vansina, *Oral tradition as history*, Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Mirza and Margaret Strobel, eds., *Three Swahili women: life histories from Mombasa, Kenya*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1989; Susan N. G. Geiger, “Women’s life histories: method and content,” *Signs*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 1986, pp. 334-351, and “Tanganyikan nationalism as ‘women’s work’: life histories, collective biography and changing historiography,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 37, No. 3, 1996, pp. 465-478; Belinda Bozzoli, with the assistance of Mmantho Nkotsoe, *Women of Phokeng: consciousness, life strategy, and migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1989*, Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 1991; Charles van Onselen, *The seed is mine: the life of Kas Maine, a South African sharecropper, 1894-1985*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1996.

communities such as peasants, workers, migrants, and women. Such interests in social history and the history of everyday cultural life have consequently posed a challenge to Vansina's original methodology. Indeed, factors of research topic, historical period, geographic location, and interpersonal fieldwork conditions have contributed to reassessments of how oral histories should be collected and interpreted. Taken as a whole, many scholars have moved away from Vansina's initial confidence in retrieving objective data from oral sources through a universally applied, social scientific method. Instead, a focus on the contingent contexts of collection and the complex local uses of oral tradition has taken hold, with scholars such as David William Cohen and Luise White emphasizing a need to recognize and understand the subjective qualities of oral evidence.<sup>3</sup> In sum, the need exists to understand how oral evidence is defined and redefined consciously and unconsciously by informants and historians in diverse social conditions.

Such debates over method provide both challenges and opportunities for teachers. Though central to the discipline, teaching African oral history to undergraduate students in American universities has posed a persistent challenge due to a general lack of oral archive collections for this purpose, in addition to a sense of geographic distance from Africa and its historical and contemporary realities. In brief, useful pedagogical tools have been few, and the historical subject matter at hand frequently appears intangible. Teaching the dimensions of oral history has therefore often been abstract and conceptual in scope. Only students with substantive fieldwork experience can understand the predicaments of collection and interpretation, and yet the ongoing, fundamental importance of oral testimony. However, the recent turn toward the relationship between African "voices" and African "words" –as recently proposed by White, Miescher and Cohen –provides a new way of addressing these practical and conceptual dilemmas

in the classroom. This essay provides a case study of how this recent approach can help overcome older problems and enhance pedagogical methods.

### **From "voices" to "words": the textual turn of African oral history and its pedagogical uses**

Luise White, Stephan Miescher, and David William Cohen argue for a re-evaluation of contemporary oral history method in their recent edited volume *African words, African voices: critical practices in oral history*. One of their central contentions is that the categorical distinction between written and oral evidence is at times overly schematic.<sup>4</sup> Their qualitative similarities –particularly as narrative forms– have suggested a common methodological ground, and the mutually constitutive interactions between the two need to be better examined. By articulating a separate distinction between words and voices, White, Miescher, and Cohen aim to cut through these traditional differences. "Words" refers to the raw material of historical research and the predicaments it can pose, particularly during the long and complex process of reworking and transforming field research into articles, books, and other texts. "Voices" symbolizes the African perspectives and opinions sought within the raw material of "words," thus underlining the fundamental goal of retrieving forms of testimony for reconstructing Africa's past.

<sup>3</sup> David William Cohen, "The undefining of oral tradition," *Ethno-history*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 1989, pp. 9-18; Luise White, *Speaking with vampires: rumor and history in colonial Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000; Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher and David William Cohen, eds., *African words, African voices: critical practices in oral history*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> For example: David Henige, "Truths yet unborn? Oral tradition as a casualty of culture contact," *Journal of African History*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1982, pp. 395-412.

Their understanding of “voices,” however, also seeks to avoid any misplaced confidence in notions of authenticity. Different methodological approaches and conditions for working with “words” can often shape the “voices” that are subsequently heard. The contributors to *African Words, African Voices* point out the multiple ways that words can be collected—from material sources and cultural practice, in addition to oral interviews—and the variety of means by which such evidence can be interpreted. Indeed, the approach of White, Miescher, and Cohen underscores the deep history of African words and voices—from slave autobiographies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to commission testimony during the colonial period, to the writings and autobiographies of anti-colonial activists and intellectuals—that complicate the baseline established by Vansina in the 1960s and the prevalent notion that the presence and importance of African oral history was recognized only then.

This motif of “words” and “voices” also opens new pedagogical possibilities for teaching African oral history. Using these categories as teaching devices in the classroom not only serves to blur previous distinctions between written and oral evidence, but in doing so they also enable teachers to use and explore written sources with a new set of tools and perspectives. [One thing is to import ways of analyzing one to analyze the other, and quite a different thing is to blur the distinctions. They are indeed different or otherwise we would not be having this discussion. This is the typical idea that our will may erase whatever is out there. At any rate, it is only substituting one dichotomy for another. And it runs the risk of confusing the mode of expression with what is expressed.] I used these categories to frame a first year undergraduate seminar on South African history that I taught at Harvard University during the fall of 2003. This class was designed to introduce students to twentieth-century South Africa from the

perspective of individual life histories. South Africa went through a number of important social changes during this period, from rapid industrialization and modernization to the rise and fall of apartheid. The seminar was consequently framed around two main organizing questions: how did individual South Africans experience these changes, and how have they expressed these experiences in their own words? With these questions forming the basis of the course, a focus on “words” and “voices,” rather than oral versus written evidence, allowed for a greater range of questioning and interpretation, specifically the ways in which oral testimony is transfigured into books and other texts.

This approach was not meant to undermine the importance of oral evidence, however. Beginning with an examination of oral history as a genre, the seminar started with a focus on the importance of oral accounts in reconstructing South Africa’s past and African history generally. Readings during the first week by Vansina, Adam Jones and Andreas Eckert, and Charles van Onselen outlined the contours and refinements of this methodology over the past four decades.<sup>5</sup> Subsequent case studies assigned from South Africa drew attention to a range of experiences—from black-white relations in rural areas to the remarkable life of Nelson Mandela—that could be explored through such methods and their recent revisions. Indeed, the first text examined is Charles van Onselen’s prize-winning book, *The seed is mine: the life of Kas Maine, a South African*

<sup>5</sup> Jan Vansina, “Oral tradition and its methodology,” in *General history of Africa: methodology and African prehistory, Volume I*, ed. by Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Paris, UNESCO, 1981, pp. 142-165; Charles van Onselen, “The reconstruction of a rural life from oral testimony: critical notes on the methodology employed in the study of a black South African sharecropper,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, April 1993, pp. 494-514; Adam Jones and Andreas Eckert, “Historical writing about everyday life,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2002, pp. 5-16.

*sharecropper, 1894-1985* a biography over 500 pages long and based on 66 interviews with Maine, in addition to dozens of other interviews with family members, peers, and white employers and acquaintances.<sup>6</sup> As a portrait of a black sharecropper who lived throughout much of the twentieth century, this book provides an unparalleled view of this turbulent period from a marginalized perspective. Indeed, as van Onselen notes, there are next to no written records on Kas Maine to be found in state archives. However, of the interviews with Maine himself, van Onselen did only five, with the vast majority done by a research assistant, Thomas Nkadimeng. This situation in itself raises fundamental questions about the recovery of “voices” and how such “words” are transliterated into texts. Although van Onselen was constrained by research conditions during the apartheid period—both language and the politics of race inevitably defined certain limits—the richness of detail and the cohesive narrative thrust found within *The seed is mine* raise multiple questions about the practice of oral history and its written outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

If Kas Maine’s biography introduced students to the complex terrain negotiated between oral evidence and written narrative, a subsequent assigned reading, Nelson Mandela’s best-selling autobiography *Long walk to freedom*, posed further questions for students as to the interaction between “voices” and “words.”<sup>8</sup> Though not an oral history or even based on oral evidence *per se*, Mandela’s text does fit on the “voices” and “words” spectrum, offering a distinct African voice and its textual expression. Unlike the tacit racial interaction that shaped the research dynamic of *The seed is mine*, students here have the confident authenticity of an African speaking for himself, or at least it appeared so initially. Given its authorship by a world-famous politician and a concomitant international audience, questions were posed to students as to the exact nature and content

of the “voice” found within the text. For example, for whom is this book written? Is there a balance between Mandela’s public and private life, or does he emphasize one realm over the other? Is there a teleology at work within the narrative, one that ends with political and personal victory? Therefore, what contingencies and failures are left unaddressed? Posing such questions of memory and narrative construction to students served to complicate any easy assumptions that African voices by themselves, without the intervention of an oral historian, are more accurate. Both autobiographical writing and oral histories have certain parameters to be understood and critically addressed, individual memory and audience among them.

With these two texts as reference points, the remainder of the course was spent examining studies that similarly explored the issue of “voice” and the transfiguration of “words” into texts. For example, students read *Not either an experimental doll: the separate worlds of three South African women*, a book of letters introduced and edited by historian Shula Marks that depicts the attempts of a black female student to receive an education in apartheid-era Natal through the assistance of a black social worker and a white university official.<sup>9</sup> This correspondence between three women reveals with fascinating detail an originally private dialogue of “voices” that was never intended to be public. An extreme case of the “voices” and “words” dynamic is the assignment of novelist J. M. Coetzee’s memoir *Boyhood: scenes from provincial life*.<sup>10</sup> Written in the third person with Coetzee’s boyhood self treated

<sup>6</sup> Van Onselen, *Seed*, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> For example: Colin Bundy, “Comparatively speaking: Kas Maine and South African agrarian history,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1997, pp. 363-370.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson Mandela, *Long walk to freedom*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Shula Marks, ed., *Not either an experimental doll: the separate worlds of three South African women*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1988.

like a character in a novel, this memoir implicitly raises questions regarding notions of selfhood and the boundaries between factual and fictive memory. The seminar concludes with an engagement with actual voices through an exploration of the role of personal testimony and history in the construction of post-apartheid South African society, specifically through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Students read journalism by Antjie Krog about the TRC hearings, as well as actual transcripts in which South Africans discuss their personal experiences under apartheid.<sup>11</sup> A documentary film *Long night's journey into day* on the TRC is also screened, so students have a more direct, visual perspective on the nature of the proceedings.<sup>12</sup> This last part of the course demonstrated the public importance of oral history, but again how factors of audience, politics, and other contextual elements can moderate “voices” and “words.”

Overall, students learned to use life histories as a lens for understanding the broader contours of South African history. Furthermore, they developed critical skills for assessing the relationship between oral sources and their textual incarnations. Though differences between written and oral sources were observed, continuities were also underscored. Student response in general was enthusiastic. Of particular interest was the broad question of how one constructs a life history, whether for oneself or for another person, whether based on written or oral evidence. Should such a history move chronologically forward from the past to the present? Is a historian entitled to edit out “words” and experiences, the raw material of a person’s life, in order to make a smoother narrative? Is an authentic, factually correct version of the past even possible to retrieve? Such questions were not, of course, comprehensively answered. However, a common ground was reached between documentary

evidence and oral testimony, articulating the similar and at times combined challenges that both present to historians. In sum, students were left with a more complex sense of how history is practiced, how it can be approached and interpreted, and the particular role of oral testimony in the fashioning of “voices” and “words.”

### **Teaching African oral history without the benefit of fieldwork: a conclusion**

This essay has sought to demonstrate the ways African oral history may be taught to university students without the benefit of oral history archives or, more importantly, fieldwork experience. Such challenges—posed particularly to teachers based outside of the continent—are not insurmountable. Recent critical approaches to engaging with the practice of oral history have provided not only new methodological considerations for senior scholars, but they also point to how more widely available written sources may be used to instruct students on the basics of collecting and interpreting African voices and words. Although participation in the field never can be fully replaced, the textual incarnations of African oral history do provide a baseline for students to work “upstream” to understand sources and methods, as well as to move subsequently forward to rework and revise such principals through their own research experience.

<sup>10</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: scenes from provincial life*, New York, Viking, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Antjie Krog, *Country of my skull: guilt, sorrow, and the limits of forgiveness in the new South Africa*, New York, Times Books, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffman, dirs., *Long night's journey into day*, South Africa, 2000, 95 min.