The Politics of Researching Africa: The Quality of Anthro-Historical and Linguistic Data in African Studies

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Abstract
This article discusses the validity and usage of a highly ethnographic historical oral data, with reference to some of the literal criticisms by African anthropologists on some of the recent historical and anthropological literatures by Western scholars. Specifically, the article analyzes the Igbo “women’s war” or “Aba riots” from the southeastern part of Colonial Nigeria in 1929 through the critical reviews of African Anthropologists. This article argues strongly that the reliability and validity of oral traditions transformed into an historical text and its usage should be based on two main factors. First, the need for Western Anthropologist or Historians to take due account of the translation of the language and cultural idioms of the culture of the people in question, and second, rational data control measures such as the triangulation of the oral data with other historical and ethnographic evidence whether written or unwritten must be taken during the usage of the oral evidence in research on Africa. The author uses a multi-source (historical and ethnographic literature) on the validity and usage of oral evidence by reputable African anthropologists and historians to critique the validity and misuse of ethnographic evidence (oral tradition) of Africa for ethnographic research or for the reconstruction of African history. The lesson from these ethnohistoric documentations is that African Anthropologists have discovered some gross mistranslations and misinterpretations of oral traditions in texts from these accounts about African culture by Western Anthropologists.

Keywords
ethnography, historiography, oral data, anthropology

Introduction
One important debate in African studies in the 1990s was the argument concerning the scholars constituting the legitimate authorities in setting the standards in the field of African studies by Western or African Anthropologists (or scholars; Olabimtan, 2014). As Olabimtan (2014) rightly pointed out, “since both groups were using the same scientific method of study, designed and mastered by the former, it is understandable that such a debate could not but emerge” (p. 285). In researching Africa, African scholars in reviewing most of the reports and research work on African history and culture by Western Anthropologists have raised the legitimate question that “should the common tools of research fashioned from European enlightenment culture and therefore unique to European experience take precedence over the experience of African Anthropologists who were expressing their scholarship from within African cultural realities?”

Nowhere was this point made more imperative than the Inaugural speech delivered at the opening of the Institute of African Studies (see Note 1), he declared that this institute must surely... study the history, culture and institutions, languages and arts of Africa in new African centred ways—in entire freedom from the propositions and presuppositions of the colonial epoch...

—Kwame Nkrumah

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Olabin (2014) posits that

if the African scholar accepts, as at present, the notion that authentic scholarship derives from the kind of detachment that Western scholars have mastered in their scientific method, there may be no contention as to where the advantage lies in the debate. (p. 285)

As Bates, Mudimbe, and O’Barr (1993) have similarly contended,

knowledge produced by an African is equally as significant and persuasive as knowledge from Europe, no less—and no more. And knowledge produced by an African is equally as significant as that produced by a European, no less and no more, if it has been generated, analyzed, and assessed in ways capable of withstanding the analytic and methodological rigorous of the author’s discipline. (p. xi)

But has this always been the epistemological and research “ethos” of Western Anthropologists/scholars in the larger body of knowledge production on Africa called “Africanism”? In this article, the author will demonstrate through the literary criticism of some of the works of Western Anthropologists by African Anthropologists, using their scholarly reviews of some of these works, due to their faulty cultural and linguistic translations and interpretations in their attempt to utilize the anthropological and linguistic data in their analysis of African history and culture, later on in this article.

The Definition and Nature of African Oral Tradition

In his classic text on African “Oral tradition and Its Methodology,” Vansina (1981) elucidated that “African civilizations in the Sahara and south of the desert were to a great extent civilizations of the spoken word” (p. 143). He, thus, explicates further that the scholar who has to work with oral traditions must do well to thoroughly understand and accept the attitude toward the speech of this oral culture, as this is of course different from that of a literate civilization which preserves all important records in writing. For Angnor (1996), the indigenous African counterpart of the modern art of literary culture lies in the oral traditions of the people. He explains further that the traditional art consists of two main forms, that is, a variety of prose narratives and poetry. The major forms of the prose genre are the folktales, legends, and myths. The poetry is rendered variously by speech, chant, and surrogates as the horn and the drum. In general, with respect to the oral traditions of the African societies, Vansina (1981) noted that “the preservation of values and norms of a given society calls for the power of the word as it binds them together and the disclosure of the secret destroys them, in terms of, destroying the identity of the society (p. 142).” In other words, this is because as he puts it, “the word destroys the common secret” (Vansina, 1981, p. 143). This notion is clearly captured in the proverb of the people of wolof in French-speaking Senegal in West-Africa, which states that “to speak is to reveal oneself” [Ku wax feen]. Moreover, Vansina (1981) explicates further that an oral society recognizes speech not only as a means of everyday communication but also as a means preserving the wisdom of ancestors enshrined in what one might call key utterances, in this case, oral tradition. Since, tradition, in this sense, is the “testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to another” (p. 143). Hence, as Vansina (1981) suggested that the foreign or native Anthropological Historian must therefore learn to work more slowly, to reflect, and to work his way into an alien system of ideas and images, as the corpus of tradition is the collective memory of a society which is explaining itself to itself. The scholar therefore must learn how the oral society thinks before he can interpret its tradition (Vansina, 1981).

This study focuses on a special kind of oral tradition, which is the “eye-witness verbal testimony” because of its crucial role in the analyses of the selected data marked for examination as we will soon see. Moreover, this source of data is an immediate source and not a transmitted, so that the risk of distortion the content are drastically reduced (Vansina, 1981, p. 143). In this respect, Vansina categorically stated that “any valid oral tradition should in fact be based on an eye-witness account” (p. 143) and this is what this study sets out to explore. In sum, a careful attention to language as we will soon analyze in the subsequent sections of this article should be of much stimulation and inspiration to future Anthropological Historians, who intend to do serious research work on any aspect of African culture, be it history, religion, politics, arts, music, dance, economics, and linguistics.

The Politics of African Historiography and Ethnographic Research

In the process of researching African based on historical or ethnographic approaches, the Western ethnographer Joan Larcom (1983) has rightly pointed out that “ethnographers today are confronted by a double task: the interpretation of a culture, and the interpretation of ethnographic writing about that culture” (p. 191). In her opinion, most Western scholars and “fieldworkers have not hesitated to interpret, sometimes quite freely, the behavior of people they observe” (Larcom, 1983). Similarly, Homer Barnett (1937), a Western ethnographer, in recounting his challenges of interpreting other cultures, conceded,

The arts and crafts give little difficulty being tangible and rigidly definable, whereas the recording of the social aspects of any culture immediately introduces the interpretative element and inevitably embarrasses the objective quality of the testimony. (p. 158)
Of course, the Western Anthropologists or Historians can afford to “not hesitate to interpret and sometimes quite freely the behavior of the people they observe” and to worsen matters, “the concept of the ‘savage’ formed the framework of their observations and comments” (Nketia, 1975, p. 6) in writing about the so-called “primitive,” “barbarous,” “savage,” or “backward” peoples.

As a result, the African Anthropologists, such as Maxwell Owusu (1997), in his critique of such Western approach to ethnographic research on Africa, writes,

The major “discoveries” of the Western ethnographer (and historian) can and have made with little concern for the integrity of the cultural realities of the individuals and groups of the societies in question, due to the cognitive and linguistic gap between himself and the subjects or natives, the ethnographer is forced to apply rigidly “scientific detachment” in their studies. (p. 710)

In reflecting on some of the issues in African historiography, the Western Historian Harry Gailey (1975), writing on “African cultures and British Administration” in the 20th century, rightly pointed out,

History in the traditional Western view has two definitions. One attitude held most strongly by European historians a century ago was that their written accounts were faithful recreations of that which actually happened. However, most twentieth century historians are more modest. They believe their histories based upon the best available evidence, are still subjective accounts of the past as created by the early Western anthropologist and historians. (p. 67)

Reflecting on this mental disposition, Kofi Asare Opoku (1996), in his article, The West Through African Eyes, noted,

Ever since the first contact with Africa, the Western image formed at that has remained fairly intact. It is not the Africa as seen by Africans, but rather Africa as the West insists on seeing it that buttresses the Western viewpoint. This is the reason why African scholars such as Ali Mazrui and D.Y. Mudimbe asserts that Africa is an invention of Europe, and most of the discourse on it has been an extension of a “Western epistemological territory.” (pp. 86-87)

As Opoku contended further, by and large, Africa is seen as a tabula rasa, a continent which has slept through the ages, and whose people had no history until the Europeans arrived. For instance, Trevor Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, could declare with characteristic objectivity that there is no history of Africa; there is only a history of the activities of Europeans in Africa (Opoku, 1996).

As a result, these myths and prejudices against Africa have been very difficult to correct, especially among the newspapermen who still trade on the sensational, or among those who find in it a rationale for, perpetrating policies of suppression and theories of racial superiority (Nketia, 1975). According to the African Ethnomusicologist and Anthropologist, Emeritus Professor Kwabena Nketia (1975),

Arabic manuscripts recovered in many parts of West Africa show that Africans were writing the histories and traditions of their cultures and recording contemporary events or writing poetry and stories. The existence of such manuscripts in places that one would least expect is one of the interesting things that has come out of recent historical research being carried out in West African Centres of African Studies. The Institute of African Studies of the University of Ghana, for example, now has a large collection of manuscripts in Arabic script written by authors in Ghana from about the eighteenth century. Some of those are in Arabic. A few are in Hausa and Ghanian languages like. (p. 6)

Even though, during the European period of African history, which followed the Islamic period, there was a considerable interest in the study of Africa; however, these studies have been written from the Western-centered point of view rather than from an African-centered point of view (Gailey, 1975; Nketia, 1975). For instance, as Daniel McCall (1964) pointed out,

studies by Margaret Priestley on Ashanti-British relations in the eighteenth century, and by Ivor Wilks on Akwamu and on Ashanti in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both have drawn on documents that though meager were not inadequate for the task. (p. 78)

Thus, the study of African history by Westerners is a projection of the discipline as developed in Europe rather than as a means of attaining cultural independence and self-pride by Africans.

However, not all African scholars felt this same urgent need to reconstruct the African past to promote self-pride and identity as a means to true political, economic, and cultural independence, after decades of colonial domination and neocolonialism. As Robert July (1987) rightly pointed out, there was one school of thought that supported the “need for past achievement in support of future freedom” (p. 129) and ultimately produced a whole new generation of historians practicing innovative systems of historiography. On the contrary, another school of thought argued that “history served little purpose, was indeed potentially harmful, for it could divide and alienate peoples who would have to come together in willing union if new nations were to survive and prosper” (p. 129). The latter argument was inevitably discarded by the former school of thought who have suffered colonial domination and continue to experience its subtle forms as termed as “neo-colonialism.”

On the question of the significance of oral tradition in ethnographic discourses in the reconstruction of the African past, the Western Africanist, Robert July (1987) indicated,
In the West, historians have tended to take historical sources for granted—they are simply the available documentary material. Indeed, with Europeans, the association of historical sources and the written word became for a time so strong that it led to an eventual perversion of cause and effect. From the position that documents served history, the scholar proceeded to the reverse—no documents, no history. Forgotten too was the obvious fact that the quality of the source is based not on form but reliability. (p. 147)

Ironically, much of the justifications and the validity of the use of African oral tradition as important historical sources of evidence was done by an European scholar, Jan Vansina (1981), who positively responded to his peers that “sources are sources...they can be good or bad but there is nothing intrinsically less valuable in an oral source than in a written one” (Vansina, 1960, p. 52). As a result, there was the renewed urge of African Anthropologists or Historians to explore and reexamine the rich archeological, linguistic, anthropological, even astronomical data as well as evidence orally transmitted. According to Robert July (1987), “these different disciplines are utilized to reinforce each other, providing chronology for events that often lack sequence, or illuminating an obscure oral testimony through reference to some aspect of a society’s present-day culture” (pp. 147-148). In this respect, Africanists intimated,

oral traditions and other cultural collections and conservations would promote African pride, and help them overcome inferiority complexes imposed on them by generations of colonialism. In other words oral traditions research had become part of the ongoing cultural and mental struggle for liberation. (Bhebe, 2002, p. 37)

The Validity of Oral Traditions in African Ethnographic Research

According to an African Ethnomusicologist, Kofi Agawu, the need for translation of language from one culture to another is the major reason why contemporary African Anthropologists should be skeptical of Western ethnographic theory (Agawu, 2012). Similarly, Twum-Akwaaboah (1979) also skeptical of Western Anthropological literature on Africa writes that it is the assumption of some European anthropologists that,

the intrusion of borrowed genre and the anthropological explanations do not seriously hamper communication. The traditional assumption is that the writer and the reader share the same basic culture. This is a fallacy. Cultures of the world are different and so long as people read foreign novels, there is bound to be problems of inter-cultural communication. (pp. 2-4)

As Western anthropologist, Edward Bruner (1986), in his article “Ethnography as Narrative,” described this “fallacy” theoretically in the following terms:

our ethnographies are coauthored, not simply because informants contribute data to the text, but because...ethnographer and informant come to share the same narratives. (p. 148)

However, Whence/Whither, in his article “History of Anthropology,” writes that in the mind of the contemporary Western Anthropologist,

the development of self-study by post-colonial “native anthropologists” raises new ethical and methodological problems...epistemological and ethical doubts have weakened methodological resolution...without yet resolving the problematic character of fieldwork method; the questioning of concepts...has not established the basis for a new integrative orientation. (p. 4)

Thus, in retrospect, one is struck with the relative dearth of discussion of the significance of using the “native languages” and the understanding of cultural idioms as ethnographic or fieldwork tools for writing about African cultures by Western scholars (Mead, 1939). Similarly, Lowie (1940, p. 122), in his classic article, “Natives Languages as Ethnographic Tools,” pointed out that “the problem of instant linguistic competence has rarely been raised either as a general issue” (Stocking, 1983).

As Twum-Akwaaboah clearly explicates theoretically, the writer and reader may have enough in common linguistically but not the foreign culture with all its traditions and idioms. Language also expresses the oral traditions, beliefs, and customs of a people, anywhere in the world. He writes further,

where the writer and reader do not share the same language and culture, as for instance, where a novel originally written by a Frenchman is translated into English by an English speaker, the message is passed through a translator who is not just a translator but a transposer of his own culture on the reader. (Twum-Akwaaboah, 1979, p. 4)

In sum, as Kofi Agawu (2012) put it, African history and ethnography as “expressed in the metropolis language means that a central challenge of ethnotheory making, like that of ethnography making is that of translation. To translate is to seek imaginative ways of negotiating boundaries and fusing worlds” (p. 1459).

The African Anthropologist, to solve this puzzle, has introduced a third concept, that is, he has substituted his interpretation of his own culture for that of the translator. In this case, the writer and reader may identify with each other by language and culture for the “translator” part as the writer do provide explanations and glossaries for those not well versed in the culture in question (Agawu, 2012). Thus, the contemporary African Anthropologists, by dispensing with the “translator” and substituting their own interpretation, have provided a classic combination between the imported European languages and genres and their traditional cultural heritage in their works (Agawu, 2012).
In present times, most African Anthropologists writing about their own cultures and histories dually “recognises and appreciates the significance of oral traditions, cultures and languages not only for their historical, literary and aesthetic values but also as powerful instruments for the restoration and assertion of African pride and identity after colonial devastation” (Bhebe, 2002, p. 37).

**Researching the Historical Background of Cultural Issues in Africa**

According to the Ghanaian Historian Akosua Perbi (1999), “Culture” can be broadly defined as

the way a group of people live—the food they eat, how they dress, the language or languages they speak; their political, social and economic institutions; their religion, art and craft, music and dance, as well as their oral literature, such as poetry and storytelling. (p. 29)

Perbi (1999) noted further that for any scholar studying preliterate African societies, oral traditions, that is, oral testimonies about the past, transmitted from one person to another occupy a special place. The oral tradition consists of narratives, whether official or unofficial, public or private, of the state, the village, or family, and also includes traditions associated with every aspect of a people’s culture (Perbi, 1999).

For most Western Historians, such as Harry Gailey (1975), “formal historical training in the twentieth century has concentrated upon the methods of collection, validation and use of written sources” (p. 67). As a result, he notes that only a few European or American historians have sparingly used oral tradition and myth in their writings on African history and culture, due to partly lack of linguistic and cultural competence. This was because “most African languages had no written forms until about the mid-nineteenth century when the missionaries and linguists began producing them” (Gailey, 1975, p. 68). Africa, however, was rich in other written artifacts in the form of architecture, household items, clothing, and art as well as oral traditions such as folktales, songs, riddles, proverbs, and wise sayings.

In these context, for most African Anthropologists and historians, the use of oral testimonies for ethnographic research or for the reconstruction of African precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial histories is the most interesting but also challenging at least if the results are “to meet the exacting canons of excellence of contemporary fieldwork” (Forter, 1969, p. 66). Thus, the student of African history and culture must be familiar with the most important studies in areas such as anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. The African Anthropologist must also use the pertinent information from these sources and blend it with the oral history of the people and the extant written records to write his history (Gailey, 1975).

**Illustrative Case Study of Biko Agozino’s Critical Review: The Women’s War of 1929—A History of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Eastern Nigeria, by Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock**

At this point, it is instructive to note that the authors (Falola & Paddock, 2011) of the book, in their preface to the book, immediately set out the background for their theoretical and methodological approach to the book by pointing out that “the narratives written by early researchers including A.E. Afigbo and Harry Gailey need to be reconciled with the later focus on the cultural and social context in which the women lived and acted” (Falola & Paddock, 2011, p. xix). More importantly, they also emphasized the fact that the narrative account published by the British government in 1930 after the investigations into the disturbances by the Igbo women who testified before the Commissions of Inquiries “lacks historical and cultural context, and recounts the events from a non-African perspective” (Afigbo & Gailey, 2011, p. xix).

Therefore, the analysis in this section will based on the critical review of the reputable African (native) anthropologist of the work of Toyin Falola and Adam Paddock on the “Women’s War of 1929 in Eastern Nigeria” to demonstrate the need for African (native) anthropologist to assess and correct some of the linguistic problems involved in the collection of oral traditions (such as witness testimonies with highly coded cultural messages) as well as their usage in the historical reconstruction of the African past based on African perspectives. In this context, the literary criticism and review of Biko Agozino on the “Women’s War of 1929 in Eastern Nigeria” by Falola and Paddock is expected to bring new perspectives into Igbo society and culture as an “insider” well versed in the traditions of that society, particularly in terms of oral traditions and so forth. In sum, this article demonstrates how African Anthropologists guided by the extent of their knowledge and competence in a particular African tradition are “able to relate analytical procedures on the structural and semantic levels to contexts of situation” (Nketia, 2013, p. 33) in recounting African ancestral traditions.

**“Women’s War of 1929” or “Aba Riots”**

According to Falola and Paddock (2011),

the Women’s War of 1929 holds an iconic place in the history of the Igbo and Ibibio people of southeastern Nigeria . . . Owing to the violent confrontations associated with the Women’s War and the widespread opposition of the women to colonial rule, the aftermath spawned both a change in the political system (in 1933) and an immediate influx of anthropologists to study a region that appeared to evade the understanding of British officials. (p. xix)

In his review article, Biko Agozino (2014) noted that the puzzle that invaded the understanding of the latter was the
fact that the British colonial officials were able to impose taxes on Igbo and Ibibio men, but when they attempted to extend the taxation to women, the women declared war on colonialism and its native collaborators.

The “Aba Riots” or the “Women’s War” started as result of the British colonial officials and their native officials attempts to impose taxes without representation on the Igbo women after they have been able to successfully tax the Igbo men (Agozino, 2014, p. 282).

The Western Anthropologist, Judith Allen, gives an overview of the agitation of the Igbo women against the colonial administration in the Calabar and Owerri provinces in the southeastern area of Nigeria as follows: In 1925, the British decided to introduce direct taxation to create the Native Treasury, which was supposed to pay for the cost of colonization. The taxes on adult males were set accordingly and were collected without widespread trouble, although there were “tax riots” in Warri Province (West of the Niger) in 1927 (Allen, 1975, p. 71).

Allen (1975) reported further that

In 1929, a zealous Assistant District Officer in Bende division of Owerri Province, apparently acting on his own initiative, decided to “tighten up” the census registers by recounting households and property. He told Chiefs that there was no plan to increase taxes or to tax women. (p. 71)

But the counting of the women and their property raised fears that women were to be taxed, particularly because the Bende District Officer had lied earlier when the men were counted and had told the men that they were not going to be taxed.

The die was finally cast, when on November 23, an agent of the Olokot Warrant Chief, Okugo, entered a compound and told one of the married women, Nwanyeruwa, to count her goats and sheep. She replied angrily, “Was your mother counted?” at which “they closed, seizing each other by the throat” (Allen, 1975) “following which the woman raised an alarm and the women of Olokot town rallied to support her the way they would traditionally ‘sit on a man’ who beat a woman as part of traditional Igbo social control” (Agozino, 2014, p. 285). According to Allen (1975),

It is not known how many women were involved, but the figure was in the tens of thousands. On two occasions, British District Officers called in police and troops, who fired on the women and left a total of more than 50 dead and 50 wounded. No one on the other side was seriously injured. (p. 60)

In his review article, Agozino (2014) pointed out that the cultural roots of the women’s war which invaded the British officials was the norm in the Igbo society and culture that was expressed in the “sayings” of the women that it was “an affront to the creator God, Chineke, to count people as if they were objects or to count their wealth as if to brag about it or whine about having too little” (p. 285). It is also important to note that, as Agozino argued,

the women war was largely non-violent, consisting of mainly camping and singing all night long to invoke the anger of the ancestors against the offenders, until they were attacked and some of their members were arrested, sexually assaulted, injured or killed by the colonial forces.

The result of which the British found “surprising”; “but then the British did not understand that the women were engaged in a traditional practice with traditional rules and limitations, only carried out in this instance on a much larger scale than in precolonial times” (Allen, 1975, p. 74).

Moreover, this was also because the women were only seeking legitimate means to protect their long cherished traditional social and political institutions as

the women demanded that neither women nor men should pay taxes or stall levies in the markets and that they did not want any Warrant Chief to be appointed over their communities unless they are the ones who elect such persons and hold them accountable in line with the traditional democratic system that the British were eager to overturn. (Agozino, 2014, p. 286)

On the contrary, in his review, Agozino (2014) emphasized, The authors argued that Lugard saw the Igbo as primitive compared to the Northerners and the Westerners in Nigeria because the Igbo did not have chiefs that would make it easy for them to be subjected to the system of indirect rule. So after the amalgamation of Northern Nigeria and Southern Nigeria colonies in 1914, Lugard proceeded to attempt to civilize the Igbo by appointing Warrant Chiefs over the radically republican Igbo. Not surprisingly, the individuals who accepted to collaborate with the British colonial project as Warrant Chiefs were those who lacked moral leadership in the community while the people rallied as one to oppose the assault on democracy. (p. 285)

**Decoding the Women’s “Testimonies” as Oral Traditions**

The Women’s War of 1929 assembles and introduces original archival documents of the testimonies recorded during the commission of enquiry to help future researchers to understand that the women’s struggles were not just merely against an unjust colonial exploitation and oppression but also a struggle to protect their “traditional Igbo political institutions” (Agozino, 2014, p. 283; Allen, 1975, p. 59). In his review article, Agozino (2014) noted,

the main argument of the authors is that the Women’s War was not a “riot” as the colonial officials wanted to belittle it. The events went far beyond Aba contrary to the arrogant or wishful delimitation of the war with the caption “Aba Riots” by colonial officials. Also the struggle was not only about economic issues but also about the encroachment of colonialism into what Bernard and Agozino (2012) identified as free and inner spaces that the people as a whole resolved to create, defend and expand. (p. 183, emphasis added)
In the view of Allen, the “Aba Riots” is the name adopted by the British; the Igbo called it Ogu Umunwanyi, the “Women’s War.” Moreover, for the British, “Aba Riots” neatly removes women from the picture. What we left with is ‘some riots at Aba’—not by women, not involving complex organisation, and not ranging over most of southeastern Nigeria” (Allen, 1975, p. 61). The differences in the terminologies employed to describe the women’s struggle to recover their “free and inner spaces” encroached by the colonial officials were also explored by Falola and Paddock in their book on The Women’s War of 1929. In his critical review of the latter’s book and some of the European scholars on this subject, Agozino (2014) revealed that “the authors explored whether the term, ‘Ogu Umunwanyi’, translates accurately as Women’s War as a European scholar argued. They reached a compromise by adopting the perspective of an Ibibio scholar who characterised the struggles as uprisings.” (p. 285)

As Agozino (2014) rightly indicated, this was an opportunity that the authors and other anthropologists missed out on this subject, of which they could have used oral traditions as a source to complement the primary and secondary sources: asking Igbo speakers to translate Ogu as opposed to Agha could have revealed that the Igbo scholar had a point when he said that Ogu, fight, battle or struggle, is not exactly Agha or war in Igbo language. The authors could have asked Ibibio speakers to translate the term their women had used to name the struggle—Ekong Iban—to see if it literally means women’s war. (p. 285)

In this respect, it would have been to the credit of the authors of The Women’s War of 1929, as historians if they had collected their own ethnographic data and not to freely rely on data churned out by Western Anthropologists as this would have prevented most of the unnecessary erroneous conclusions about their findings.

As we have discussed elsewhere, problems of intercultural communication raise its ugly head, as one translates a foreign language and culture to his language. In this case, the translator not only translates the foreign language but also imposes one’s own culture and idioms on the speakers of the foreign language. In this case, the African (native) anthropologist by disposing the “translator” brings the “insider” perspectives to bear on the Igbo society and culture through his or her authoritative accounts. Agozino (2014) pointed out that “the authors erred by not including an author who is literate in Igbo language while waxing authoritative about Igbo concepts that they did not fully understand” (p. 288). According to Agozino, the authors mistranslated the Igbo concept “ohadum” to mean women of all communities when it simply refers to the community in entirety (Oha = community; dum = whole). Agozino explicated further that the term is similar to “Ohaneze,” the apex of the Igbo political and cultural organisation that exists today in Nigeria, a term that denotes that the community is its own eze (king) or that the community is self-governing and so there is no need for a chief or king to be imposed on a democratic people who continue to say proudly that the Igbo know no king. (p. 289)

Once again, Agozino (2014) suggested,

Had the authors explored this concept further through oral traditions, they could have avoided the error of describing traditional Igbo political system as a patriarchy under the domination of male rulers. The very history they documented is a challenge to the colonialist reading of Igbo culture that privileged patriarchy in line with the preferred nuclear family structures of Europe but quite alien to the women and the men of Igboland and Ibibioland who would stomach no nonsense from anyone whether he claims to be a patriarch or an elder. (p. 289)

Another misinterpretation of the Igbo culture and society by the authors identified by Agozino was the fact they made strange claim that the Igbo week has 8 days made up of market days and big markets. According to Agozino (2014),

That is really funny because any Igbo person will tell you that Igbo week is made up of only four days named after market days because of the centrality of commerce in Igbo worldviews. When the Igbo talk about markets and big markets . . . the reference is to a big market that could be found in a town that also has a smaller market in a village on the same day. Thus Orie might be a market day in a small village while Orie Ukwu is the big marketplace on the same day at a different location in the same town or nearby. Someone must have told the authors that Orie Ukwu is a completely different day of the week but it is absolutely not so. (p. 288)

In short, in this process, employing “witness testimonies” in the “Women’s War” or “Aba Riots” by the Western Anthropologists should be supported by an African Anthropologist who is also a native speaker of the Igbo language. The latter must also be well versed in the customs, traditions, and values of the Igbo society for a valid and true translation, representation, and interpretation of the culture of the people to outsiders. The same strategy is highly recommended for scholars seeking new ways of interpreting and understanding the African worldview and also as a means for historical reconstruction.

**The Usage of Oral Traditions for African Historical Reconstruction**

The practice in which the African Anthropologist collect the oral traditions of a people to reconstruct their past is very important considering the fact that for most, African societies lacked written documentary records on their cultural, social, political, and economic institutions. As Mamba (2002) rightly noted,

the reconstruction of African history, focusing on African societies before writing became a permanent feature, is not more
than 50 years old. For most part, academics and amateur writers were interested in documents left by European travelers, missionaries, traders and administrators, when writing the history or languages of an African society. This approach entailed looking at these societies through the spectacles of the European observers [and not from an African centered approach]. (p. 182)

Mamba (2002) explicated further that
to a great extent, these writings have been at variance with the true picture of the societies in question, and with the people's knowledge of their histories. Only oral traditions and eyewitness accounts, collected from African societies, have helped writers on Africa to see the gap between the written accounts from documentary evidence and the people's presentation of their own past. (p. 182).

In this context, it is important for the African Anthropologists to be conscious of the assumptions and presuppositions, in the interpretation and their use of the oral traditions by eye witnesses in The Women's War of 1929 in anthropological or historical research on the African (Igbo) society and culture as recorded by Western anthropologists. Since, most of the writings of anthropologists during the colonial period were to provide justifications for the system of political, economic, and cultural domination. As Wendy James (1973) warned,

As an individual, the anthropologist can often appear as a critic of colonial policy, of the philosophy of Western superiority upon which it was based and in terms of which it was justified; and he was usually at odds with the various administrators, missionaries, and other local Europeans he had dealings with . . . But he was nevertheless dependent upon colonial authorities for permission to carry out his studies, and sometimes for material support. (pp. 44, 47)

Thus, to avoid such pitfalls in the use of ethnography recorded by Western scholars, African anthropologist and historian must go beyond the previously accumulated data and seek to use oral traditions pertinent to his own purposes. As Agozino (2014) pointed out that to the credit of the authors of The Women's War of 1929

they expressed doubts about the objectivity of the colonial records but this should have prompted them to include the perspectives of Africans who may have heard their ancestors tell the story from different angles or rely more on Africans who did write about the events while they were taking place. (p. 287)

The use of oral evidence such as the witness testimonies from the women's war for writing history by African anthropologists and historians is interesting because “the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction” is an “invaluable and compelling research method” (see Note 5) for the reconstruction of the African past. It opens up access to undocumented experience of the “hidden histories” of people on the margins: workers, women, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and members of the oppressed or marginalized groups.

However, the uses of oral evidence such as “witness testimonies” by Anthropologists and Historians have been severely criticized (Thomson, 1998, p. 584). Mostly, at the core of criticisms of oral history in the early 1970s was the assertion that memory was distorted by physical deterioration and nostalgia in old age, by personal bias of both interviewer and interviewee, and by the influence of collective and retrospective versions of the past. (Thomson, 1998, p. 584)

Thus, there is the need for a broader perspective, by African anthropologists in their use of oral evidence prepared by European anthropologists, “to take account of wide issues of Western rule, economic as well as imperial; they have to be acquainted with the rudiments at least of economic, legal and political theory and, with all this, of the anthropological method” (Ntarangwi, Babiker, & Mills, 2006, p. 67).

In this respect, the generation of “reliable” and “valid” ethnographic data is very important for the accumulation of objective knowledge about the history, politics and culture of Africa. Some African Anthropologists vehemently challenged the use of these oral testimonies written by Western Anthropologists, based on their reliability and validity for ethnographic research on Africa. For instance, Ghanaian Anthropologist, Maxwell Owusu (1997) noted,

A careful reading of the typical “tribal” monograph ingeniously protected by an “ethnographic present” and written in obscure “scientific” and esoteric language demonstrates one thing: it is virtually impossible, particularly for the native for the native anthropologist to falsify, replicate, or evaluate it objectively. For frequently, it is not clear whether the accounts so brilliantly presented are about native realities at all or whether they are about informants, about “scientific” models and imaginative speculations, or about the anthropologists themselves and their fantasies. (p. 705)

Specifically, in relation to the usefulness of the witness testimonies from the women’s war also known as the “Aba riots,” the Western Anthropologist and Historian, Harry Gailey (1970), in his article, “The Road to Aba: A Study of British Administrative Policy in Eastern Nigeria,” admitted that these distortions in generation of the oral evidence from the commission of inquiry on the women’s war, he writes that the “Ogbo” society in southeastern Nigeria, where the disturbances took place, if it did even exist,

was certainly in a form different from that described by the British administrators. However, faulty the British understanding of the details of the women’s organizations, their conclusions were basically correct. (p. 102)
Of course, this astonishing admission by the Historian violates the ethics and logic of social science research in terms of objectivity, holistic approach, reliability, and validity of findings from the qualitative (ethnographic) research, which cannot certainly be based on faulty ethnographic data (in this oral history data), which is highly liable to distortion and biases such as the “witness testimonies from the women’s war.” There is the need for African historians to take into consideration the socio-cultural and language of the people they are trying to study and write about. This requires the use of native Anthropologist fluent in the African language, Customs, social, and political organization of the people in the study. Moreover, scholars in their usage of textually printed oral evidence from the colonial archives, must also be circumspect by subjecting it translations with native sources as well as the published documents written by African scholars, as “the archives were also the documentation of carefully censored narratives and not just objective facts, themes and theories” (Agozino, 2014, p. 287).

Moreover, the critical analyses and interpretation of the witness testimonies of the women’s war by the African historian reveal their political aims and outcomes. For instance, it indicates the records of the life histories of the oppressed and undocumented, “Igbo women” and their relationship with the colonial powers. There is also the need for scholars to be more sensitive to the usage of the colonial archives on reports of these subjugated women in their protest actions against foreign political domination in their communities and to help set the records straight with respect to these distorted colonial archival data that intentionally ignored or misconceived their true lived experiences or roles. In the words of Thomson (1998), “it also opens up an ethical, legal, and political can of worms” (p. 594). As these testimonies from the women reveal the negative and positive impact of colonial rule on their daily lives, the data from the inquiries into their demands on the colony system must be fairly used to achieve their maximum political effect.

Apart from their political and social aims, the use of the testimonies from the oppressed women should also serve as a form of “empowerment as they find words and meanings of their experiences and they stimulate public recognition and affirmation of experiences that have been previously been ignored or silenced as evidenced” (Thomson, 1998, p. 590). Thomson (1998) pointed out that, this call for a two-way use of oral histories, that is, “to improve historical understanding of oral histories, in which the reassertion of previously silenced histories can be empowering for individuals, social groups or whole societies” (Thomson, 1998, p. 591)—in this case, the “Igbo” women in southeastern Nigeria, in question and their “witness testimonies” in the so-called “Aba riots.”

The Historian or Anthropologist as a Social Scientist, in the conduct of his research activities, is expected to triangulate his oral data from the field against other documentary evidence or other data sources, to mitigate some of the pitfalls in the use of oral testimonies or oral data, to improve the replicability of his or her research findings. Moreover, following John Gerring (2007), the historian is assumed to be aware of basic social science “injunctions” or standards that (a) one’s use of sources—written, oral, or dataset—should be intelligent, taking into account possible biases and omissions; (b) whatever procedures (in this case, the Historian or Anthropologist) follows (qualitative or quantitative, library work or field research) should be described in enough detail to be replicable; (c) finally, the need to consider plausible alternatives to the argument that he or she presents, to those presented by the literature on the topic as well as those that might suggest themselves to a knowledgeable reader (p. 9).

As Daniel McCall (1964) conceded on the use of oral sources for Africa historical reconstruction,

> then our thesis is that historical evidence is any analyzable survival from the past . . . These are not only pertinent but indispensable to the reconstruction of history in areas and periods where reliance must be put on unwritten sources of evidence. Results of such work are truly a part of history, which is an ever-expanding search for knowledge of man’s past. (p. 27).

**Concluding Remarks**

This article also demonstrates that the Historian in writing about the African past must not simply rely on anthropological data prepared by Western anthropologist but has to employ his own experience as an “insider” to collect, translate, and interpret the data. This strategy will improve the validity and reliability of the data and the results for the research work, to avoid the gross mistranslations and misinterpretations of oral traditions in texts from these accounts about African culture by Western Anthropologists. There is also the need for the historian to use his expertise to skillfully negotiate, recognize differences involving the use of oral data and triangulating it with other documentary sources of empirical data. More importantly, the mastering of the language of the people under investigation and their socio-cultural, political worldview is very crucial for the Western or African Historian-Anthropologist researching on colonial Nigeria or Africa in general as this study has demonstrated.
On the contrary, this study also suggests that the guidance of native Anthropological Historians in the fieldwork activities of foreign scholars will definitely improve the quality of the data collection work of the latter. However, there is the pitfall of the so-called native Anthropological Historian to also introduce bias and distortion into the data. In sum, the best research practice is for the scholar to be well versed in the idioms (in terms of the language of the society in question and its norms and values) of the African culture to be studied. For example, as Bloch Maurice (1975) put it, the Historical Anthropologist, before entering the field, should have mastered the “all the proverbs, stories, speech forms and patterns” (p. 8) as it relates to the oral traditions of the custom of the area of study in question. This might be a daunting task for any foreign researcher as this definitely involves “a deeper understanding of the society he wishes to study, both of its basic categories and its ethical systems, as well as in terms of how it works on a day-to-day basis” (Maurice, 1975, p. 8). In sum, as the popular saying goes, “there is no shortcut to success”; in other words, it will immensely pay off in the long-run for the scholar to undergo this painstaking “baptism of fire” to protect the integrity and quality of their research data and its validity in their final research reports.

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Notes

1. See Nkrumah Kwame (speech delivered at the opening of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, October 25, 1963, http://nkrumahinfobank.org/article.php?id=440&c=51).
2. Quoted in Frederick Schaffer’s (1998) classic book on Democracy in Translation: Understanding Politics in an Unfamiliar Culture.
3. Allen (1975) explains that to “sit on” or “make war on” (p. 61), a man involved gathering at his compound at a previously agreed-upon time, dancing, singing scurrilous songs detailing the women’s grievances against him.
4. See Uchendu (1965, p. 5; Okonjo, 1974, p. 25 as cited in Allen, 1975, p. 59).
5. See Grele (1998), as cited in Thomson (1998, p. 584).
6. For a fuller discussion of this problem, see Maxwell Owusu’s (1997) classic work on the Ethnography of Africa: The Usefulness of the Useless.

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