

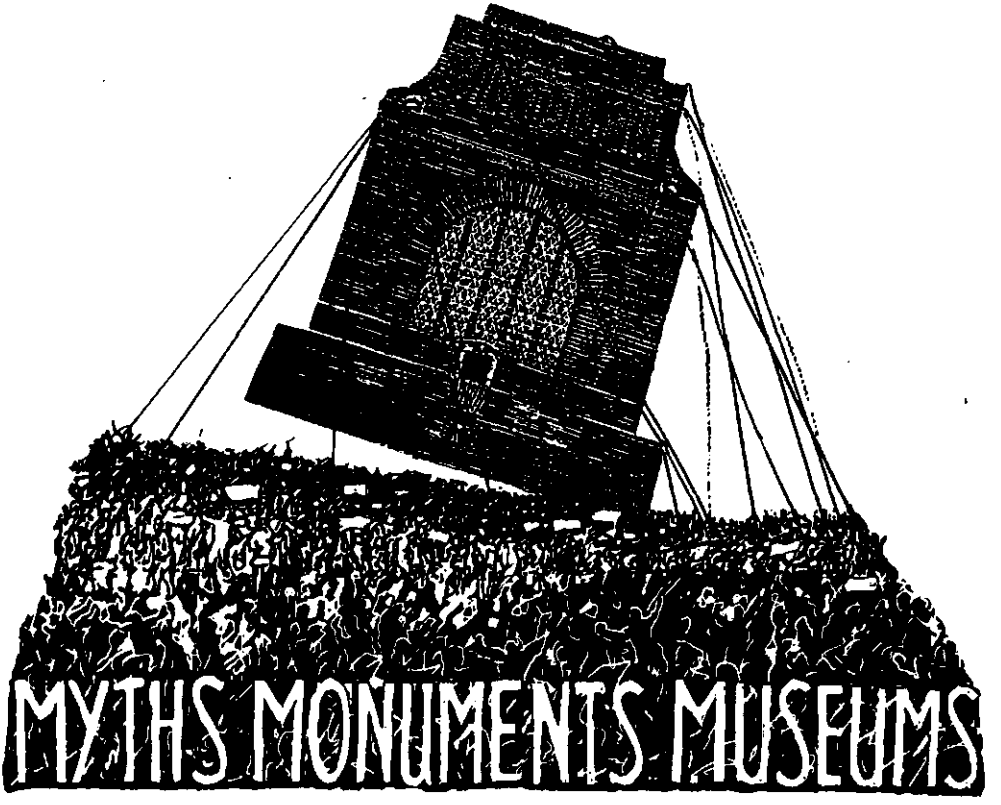
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# Learn from the dying generation: a critical analysis of oral tradition in history reconstruction

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HISTORY WORKSHOP

'LEARN FROM THE DYING GENERATION': A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ORAL TRADITION IN HISTORY RECONSTRUCTION.

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AFRICANA

# Learn From the Dying Generation: A Critical Analysis of Oral Traditions in the Reconstruction of History.

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(Please note that this paper came to us as a facsimile transmission with a thick line running through the right side of the text. We have re-typed it, but may well have transcribed some words inaccurately. Also, we found some words totally illegible. We ask the author's pardon.)

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we have attempted to discuss some of the underlying forces that have influenced the writing of history in Central and Southern African regions. Reference is made to the debate over the concept of oral traditions as a methodological approach to historical reconstruction. It is argued that despite its demerits it is a useful source of evidence. It is further argued that if oral tradition is fully exploited by historians, it has a significant role to play in forging national unity. The paper ends with an appeal to historians and other researchers to take up the challenge of collecting oral traditions particularly from the elderly members of society as these are usually better repositories of these traditions. Researchers can learn a lot from them.

## DEFINITION OF ORAL TRADITIONS

The writing of history can be exciting but at the same time the historian is mindful of the need to be objective. But whether objectivity can ever be attained is another question. It is our view that what brings a historian nearer to objectivity is the methodology he employs in data collection. One of the tools that has been employed in historical reconstruction is oral traditions. Oral Traditions has been defined differently by different people. John Kasapo used an all embracing definition when he said Oral Traditions as it were, is an education, an entire cultural heritage,...? of philosophical and artistic teaching of the past about human life, which is modified or enriched by successive generations that have passed it on or transmitted it solely by word of mouth. (1)

This definition embodies unwritten sources of information or knowledge which is transmitted from one generation to another by word of mouth. Before we critically examine this source, it would be helpful to look at the trends that have characterised African historiography in the last three decades.

## SHIFTING TRENDS IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN AFRICAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

It is evident from the works of history that have appeared in the last thirty years or so in these regions that there have been

shifting trends in the writing of history. It is always important to note that there are always forces which influence historians. These forces include:

a) historical epoch in which the writer lives;
b) political "climate" at a given time may influence the historian in order to influence the thinking of the intended readership;
c) national bias may influence the writer so that he emphasises certain issues while consciously or otherwise playing down others depending on his nationality;
d) the author's ideological inclinations may influence him; and
e) the class position of the author may sometimes affect his writing.

In the Victorian epoch, European historians tended to paint a view that Africans had no history until the advent of colonial domination. These historians saw colonial conquests an missionary maneuvers as ...? and evangelisation missions, which according to them, were essential to Africa's future progress. (2)

These historians saw civilisation in terms of European culture and any society that did not cherish the same values as Europeans was regarded as backward and uncivilised.

Central Africa saw a slight shift within the camp of colonial historians in the 1960s in the wake of raging African nationalism. In a desperate effort to diffuse imminent demise of colonialism, a new class of historians wrote to influence their colonial governments to reform themselves so that the emerging African elite could be integrated into the colonial system. Gann is one good example. He said:

> The future seems to tie with economic integration and further economic development. ... ? progress has already brought wider opportunities for Africans. The educated African in Rhodesia may be embittered by colour prejudice; but as long as improvements continue to be made, and as long as he has well-paying job and hopes of ... ? advancement, it is unlikely that he will rebel. (3)

But this warning came too late because the decolonisation process followed in the 1960s. Political independence to most Central African countries brought about a new breed of historians with a new perception of African history. Donald Denoon and Adam Kuper noted the emergence of this breed of historians when they commented "Dar-es-Salaam School of Historiographers emerged". (4) Notable among them were T.O. Ranger, I.N. Kimambo, J. Temu, John Ilife, Andrew D. Roberts. (5)

Their mission was to correct the earlier impression created by colonial historians who wrote on the assumption that the only worthwhile topics for consideration were the so-called interventions of more "advanced" external cultures upon an inert

tropical Africa.

The new group endeavoured to write history for Africans. Whereas colonial historians saw African history as beginning with the advent of colonialism, they argued that history happens among all people at all times. Denoon and Kuper argued that the nationalist school of thought emerged because they suffered "sense of guilt by racial association and are anxious to disassociate themselves from their older colleagues". (6)

The concept of nation-building became crucial in the independence era as each country attempted to find common identity so that it could serve as a unifying factor among different ethnic groups. The role of the nationalist historians in this epoch was to find common identity in ethnic histories. This gave rise to the ideology of African Socialism (7) which idealised and glorified the African past.

After the attainment of political independence, people expected to see fruits of independence in the economic field. When these were not forthcoming, the basic question they asked was: What has created the situation? As they sought explanation for the economic stagnation another cycle of historiography emerged. Some historians like Richard Gray and David Birmingham explained the situation in terms of markets of exchange (8) while others advanced the modernisation theory which argued that if proper inputs were instituted in developed economies there would be progressive stages necessary for take-off. They further argued that if industries were set up, over time the economic growth that would result therefrom, would ultimately trickle down to the poverty-stricken rural areas. (9) The failure of export-oriented growth was explained in terms of African economies' failure to create appropriate institutions to provide them with necessary market incentives.

Another school of thought spear-headed by Gunder Frank, Walter Rodney and Samir Amin emerged and refuted the explanation of rural poverty in terms of people's attitudes or lack of appropriate institutions or lack of market incentives. These exponents of underdevelopment and dependency theory explained Africa's poverty in terms of world division of labour and unequal exchange in the world economic system. The siphoning of surpluses from African economies resulted in failure to structurally achieve the self-determination of their political superstructure and their economic base. (10) This theory was very popular in the mid 1970s and early 1980s.

In the mid 1980s we saw another cycle in the historiography of the regions as historians started investigating social themes as they realised that underdevelopment theory alone could not be used to explain the poverty that had characterised the so-called Third World countries. Historians are now researching on themes that have been ignored by earlier writers but have bearing on development. These include such themes as women and education,

exploitation of female labour in the production process, property ownership, power, property and gender, political economy of health, patterns of disease and medicine and housing in an industrial setting etc. In addition to the ideas discussed above, it seems South African historiography has been greatly influenced by internal factors. L.M. Thompson has attempted to catalogue these forces, starting from the domination of Dutch settlers to the establishment of the Apartheid policy. (12)

In the next section we shall attempt to examine the effect of these shifting trends on the methodology used by these historians.

ORAL TRADITIONS IN HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION

For a historian to write history he/she must use primary and secondary sources. Primary sources refer to those sources which have original material which can be analysed and synthesised by the author in the reconstruction of any aspect of human history. These can either be written or unwritten. Oral traditions falls in the latter category. Secondary sources refer to the information and historical facts (13) that a historian collects, organises systematically, analyses and interprets. After these stages he writes up.

Before the publication of Jan Vansina's works in the ...? oral traditions was not considered a source of history writing. (14) Before the emergence of the nationalist historians in the 1960s colonial historians insisted on written evidence because they believed that what was written was the foundation of knowledge. As we pointed out earlier on Nationalist historians had an enormous task of either re-writing African history to correct the distortions made by earlier writer to reconstruct it to show that Africans had history even before the advent of colonialism. Since African societies had no written sources except for the few left by early travellers and traders, oral traditions became the back-bone in their methodology. Discussing this point Vansina had this to say: "In those parts of the world inhabited by peoples without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for a reconstruction of the past and even among the peoples who have writing ,,," (15) Mutumba Mainga, one of the first African historians who reconstructed the political history of the Lozi aristocracy had this to say:

> The value and use of oral tradition has been discussed in detail by such scholars as Jan Vansina and Ian Cunnison. It is pointless to go over the same ground here beyond affirming the belief which has become general in recent years that oral tradition if critically used is a valuable source for the historical reconstruction of the African past. (16)

Of course, the use of oral tradition did not go unchallenged by those who did not see it as a reliable method. The Annales school

of history was singled out by Vansina as one example of such critics. (17) There are a number of weaknesses in the use of oral traditions. First, changes may occur to the initial testimony of a tradition as it gets handed down in the form of hear-say account from one informant to the other until the last testimony on the train of transmission is reached. Each informant may introduce his/her version to enhance his/her national ? Secondly, the preservation of oral traditions depends on the power of memory of successive generations of people. Failure of memory may bring about omissions and confusion and sometimes events of one period may be collapsed into one event. This is often referred to as telescoping. Thirdly, some informants may deliberately distort the facts because they do not want to reveal their past. Others will glorify themselves so that we can only know the good side of them. Fourthly, oral traditions tend to give information which is essentially of a political, ideological and legal nature striving to reproduce the superstructures of the society. Because of these witnesses oral traditions was often dismissed as charters and myths and therefore useless as a historical source. In reaction, Vansina posed a question: "Is the lack of an absolute chronology sufficient reason for rejecting oral sources in the methodological field of the historian...?" She further asked those who questioned the usefulness of traditions in historical reconstruction because it was alleged to be unscientific "should we not by the same token, eliminate written documents?" (18) Terence Ranger who had written earlier questioned the total dependence on written accounts even from eye-witness accounts which usually have distortions, contradictions and biases. (19) To get round these problems, historians should always use criticism of sources as a test to decide if the evidence before them is useful for a specific purpose or not. A resourceful research will discover that oral traditions are always question-? and this weakness can be capitalised upon and will lead to investigation of other issues hitherto unthought of.

This paper does not intend to re-open the debate on the appropriateness and usefulness of oral traditions as a historical methodology. Researchers in general and historians in particular in Africa ad elsewhere are now in agreement over the validity and applicability of this methodology in carrying on research. The paper intends to highlight the problem researchers encounter in collecting and preserving oral traditions which is an important element of cultural heritage. These problems will be discussed in more detail below.

## THE ROLE OF ORAL TRADITIONS IN A MULTI-RACIAL SOCIETY

Just like in the 1960s when nationalism was raging on and historians had a task of tracing the roots of ethnic groups to identify common identity which was necessary in the concept of nation-building, historians today have a role to tabulate the knowledge of cultural affiliations of the various racial groupings. Each racial or ethnic group will only appreciate the other's customs if this knowledge had been brought to their

dispo? by historians. For example, a white Zambian finds it strange to see the ? "crawl" as they approach the Litunga. (20) Similarly a black Zambian sees nothing wrong in using a shorter route through a white farmer's farm when the fields are not under cultivation while the owner will be offended as he sees this as trespassing. But when one conducts an enquiry into the traditions of the two groups one finds answers to the problem. The other example would be; a Zambian of Asian origin gets surprised when he sees a Tonga man denouncing (?) his wife or wives while a Tonga sympathises with his Asian friend who has to withstand his quarrelsome wife.

A highly multi-racial society like South Africa, in the opinion of the author, needs this knowledge for each group to tolerate or appreciate each other's cultures. One is inclined to argue that this violence we are witnessing partly has some of its roots in the political history of the country. (21)

All these are issues that can be investigated and elderly members of these societies have some of the answers but this information will be lost if researchers do not move in fast. Once these traditions are collected, they should be disseminated to the public in a number of ways including publications, mass media, drama, exhibitions and lecture seminars. The ultimate aim should be to integrate all groups of diverse cultural affinities into one harmonious nation and forge national unity in ? However, I do not want to sound simplistic as I am aware that national unity is a complex subject but I am positive that if other measures are correspondingly pursued, national unity which is so vital in national development can be achieved.

## PROBLEMS IN THE COLLECTION AND PRESERVATION OF ORAL TRADITIONS

From the aforesaid, there is no doubt that oral traditions has an important role to play in national reconstruction. But one of the problems researchers have faced is to reach the repositories of traditions, many of whom dwell in rural areas. The development patterns of African countries, most of which still maintain colonial legacy has not made rural areas easily accessible. While urban areas have over time developed reasonably good infrastructure, rural areas have lagged far behind. This lopsided nature of colonial development has left rural areas inaccessible and independent government has done very little to correct the imbalance. This problem makes it difficult for a researcher who is competing against time and death, the mortal enemies of oral traditions, to get to the repositories of oral traditions, most of whom are now in the afternoon of their lives.

In most countries of these regions, research, this including collection of oral traditions, is carried out by universities, museums, ? archives and Department of Cultural Services. A closer examination reveals that these depend on central governments for funding and are usually given first priority in the government budget. This has made it difficult for these institutions to

carry out this noble task of collecting the fast disappearing element of our cultural heritage. As George Mvenge recently pointed out, a field researcher is under constant pressure to return to the museum within the shortest possible time, on account of inadequate funding. He further states that arguments have been known to occur between the Curator who goes into the field to collect and the Financial Administrator who provides the financial back-up for such trips. (22)

Shortage of trained manpower in the institutions charged with the responsibility of collecting oral traditions is another serious problem. To perform this function there should be personnel adequately trained and equipped with methodological techniques to enable them to solicit for information from those who have it. Although Zambia has trained adequate manpower in these fields, most of the personnel have left the country and have been absorbed in the Southern African Regional Economic System due to poor remuneration offered.

Lack of transport and equipment to enable researchers to undertake regular research trips has had profound effect on the collection of oral traditions. The situation is likely to deteriorate if no corrective measures are taken now. This is compounded by lack of equipment for transcription if data is collected. One needs equipment good enough to give a reasonable level of audibility. A good transcript should bear a name of the informant, researcher, date and place of the interview and age of the informant. It is advisable to have duplicate copies in case of loss, fire, theft or poor storage..

The other problems encountered during collection or oral traditions are methodological rather than administrative. When a researcher sets out to collect data he has an enormous task of winning the confidence of his interviewees. As one museum worker put it: "He must be able to convince them of the necessity to build up museum collections. The Curator may be forced to participate in activities that require him to spend." (23) Sometimes a researcher whose political inclinations are not known to the informants will be rejected. Language barrier between the interviewer and the interviewee can be a serious handicap. In fact whenever time allows, it is advisable for the researcher to study the language of the people he is investigating.

In any society the elderly members of the society are expected to know more about their society than the younger ones. They will try to glorify their past and glorify those they consider as their heroes. When this method was introduced, researchers tended to rely heavily on the traditions given by members of the ruling class, notable, spiritual leaders, elders and ? who by virtue of their offices were expected to possess "thorough" knowledge of their society. This sometimes resulted on the reproduction of myths or the creation of new myths. (24) The researcher should endeavour to collect oral traditions from the cross-section of the society under study to eliminate biases, distortions,

falsifications, exaggerations and to fill in both genuine and deliberate omissions. He/she should collect as many variants of a given oral tradition as possible at different levels of society.

Sometimes a researcher in the field finds himself confronted with gender issues. The author's field-work experience is that there are still men who do not allow their wives to talk to male strangers in their absence. If the husband is at home and has allowed her to be interviewed he himself will sit within hearing range to censor the information she gives. More often than not, men want to be seen as the chief custodians of knowledge.

There are always informants who from the outset would like to know whether or not there would be remuneration, in monetary terms, at the end of the interview in exchange for the information.

Those are usually the "wise" men of the society who are constantly called upon to give information about their society or to solve intricate problems or cases in their locality.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have argued that despite the weaknesses inherent in oral traditions, it is a useful methodological approach to the reconstruction of history as it can reveal the cultural traits and values of the society under investigation. In order not to fall victim to these weaknesses, the researcher should apply other methodological approaches to cross check. Contrary to those who still think that oral traditions serve aristocratic classes only by giving glorious accounts of chiefs (25) they reveal perceived trends, often disguised as events and can also reveal nationalistic inclinations of a people. This poem recited by an Afrikaner after the Slagter's Nek rebellion against the British government in 1815 illustrates this point:

> And while we sit and meditate for a moment among their friends by their grave, we feel that our heart says: Weep Afrikaners! - Here lie your flesh and blood! Martyred in the cruellest manner. Wrong was it to rebel against their government; but truly they did not do it without reason! Wrong was it to take up arms; but only because they were too ? Guilty they were, says the earthly judge, but what shall the Heavenly Judge say some time? But come! it is getting darker! - Come, do not sit here too long, then we too shall be regarded as conspirators! Come - another day will dawn then we shall perhaps see the grave in another light! Come we go home with a quiet sigh. (26)

If researchers do not move in fast to collect such a heritage, it will be lost as the custodians of such vital knowledge may not survive the next decade. Let's get to the source before death gets there ...? Ideas like those perpetuated by authors like Spear who thought oral traditions was for the reconstruction of

history of black Africa can no longer be entertained. (27) Researchers, historians inclusive, are in agreement that this methodology can be applied to any history. While we acknowledge that the problems researchers encounter in their efforts to collect data are real, ? this conference should find solutions to common problems.

We shall not be contented with the literature than exists. Any new evidence can be re-interpreted in the light of the prevailing conditions today. As Spear points out, oral traditions should be subjected to continual re-interpretation as "words from the past take on contemporary meanings in the context of the present..." (28) It should always be remembered that "heroes and conquerors do not make history, historians do". (29) McCall reminds us that, after all, there can be "as many histories as historians" and "no historical epoch is closed while historians are alive. Everything is subject to re-interpretation; there is no final historical truth". (30) Research should continue in order to answer today's question.

Undertaking a project like this one would be in line with the UNESCO declaration of this decade as a Decade for Cultural Development.

NOTES

1. John M. Kasapo, "Utilization and Promotion of Oral Tr[redacted]ons: A case of Zambia". Paper presented at the Sub-Regional Semi[redacted]n Oral Traditionss, Lusaka, 20th - 27th July, 1985.
2. Lewis H. Gann and Peter Durgnan, White Settlers in Tr[redacted]l Africa. (Middlesex Penguin Book Ltd., 1962) p7.
3. Gann and Duignan, White Settlers. p9.
4. Donald Denon and Adam Kuper, "Nationalist Historian i[redacted]rch of a Nation: The new Historiography in Dar-es-Salaam", African Aff[redacted]69, 277 (1970).
5. See Denoon and Kuper, "Nationalist Historian". 329.
6. Denoon and Kuper, "Nationalist Historian", 330.
7. African socialism assumed different names in differen[redacted]ntries. In Zambia it was Humanism, in Kenya it was Harambe, in U[redacted] it was Common Man's Charter and Ujama in Tanzania, etc, etc.
8. See Richard Gray and David Birmingham (eds.) Pre-colo[redacted] African Trade: Essays on Trade in Central and Eastern Africa Before [redacted] (London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
9. See Ann Seidman, "The Economics of Eliminating Rural [redacted]ty", in Ben Turok (ed.) Development in Zambia: A Reader. (London:Zed Pr[redacted] (1979) p.39. William J. Barber, The Economy of British Central Afr[redacted] A Case of Economic Development in a Dualistic Society. (London: Oxford U[redacted]sity Press, 1961)p4.
10. For this region see Robin Palmer and Neil Paisons (ed[redacted]he Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa. (London: Hein[redacted] Educational Books Ltd., 1977).
11. See A.C.S. Mushingeh, "A History of Disease and Medic[redacted]n Botswana, 1820-1945" Ph.D Thesis, University of Cambridge, (August, 1984). F.M. Mizinga, "Inheritance and Social Change Among th[redacted]ga of Southern Province of Zambia, 1900-1989" M.A. Dissertation, Uni[redacted]ty of Zambia, (1990). Gabriel Muhwanga, "Housing in Livingstone: Government[redacted]cy and Practice, 1946-1976," M.A. Dissertation, University of Zambia, [redacted]).

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12. See L.M. Thompson, "Afrikaner Nationalist Historiogra[redacted]nd the Policy of Apartheid" Journal of African History, 3,1,(1962) 125-

13. The concept of "historical fact" is controversial. Fo[redacted]tended debate see E.H. Carr, What is History? (Middlesex: Penguin Bo[redacted]Ltd., 1985)p.7-30.

14. See Jan Vansina, Oral Traditions: A Study in Historica[redacted]thodology. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

15. Vansina, Oral Traditions. p.1.

16. Mutumba Mainga, Bulozi Under the Luyana Kings: Politic[redacted]volution and State Formation in Pre-colonial Zambia. (London:Longman Grou[redacted]d., 1973)p.218.

17. See Jan Vansina, "For Oral Tradition (But Not Against [redacted]der)" History in Africa 5, (1978), 151-156.

18. Vansina, "For Oral Tradition", 353.

19. Terence Ranger, "The Re-writing of African History Dur[redacted]he Scramble; The Matabele Dominance in Mashonaland, "African S[redacted] Research, 4, (1967) 271-282. Jones had made a similar warning. He c[redacted]Capt. Adams who made a wild guess that 20,000 slaves were shipped[redacted]ally from the then Bight of Biafra and later historians quoted [redacted]figure without questioning it. See G.I. Jones, "European and Af[redacted] Tradition on the Rio Real", Journal of African History, 4, 3, (196[redacted]91.

20. Litunga is a local title for a Lozi King or Paramount [redacted].

21. Chief Gatsha Buthelezi has been at the centre of the c[redacted]versy in South African violence but unfortunately a recent work on hi[redacted]s not go far back into history to trace the roots of the problem. S[redacted]ala, Gatsha Buthelezi: Chief with a Double Agenda"". (London: Zed [redacted], 1988).

22. George Mvenge, "The Economic and Social Constraints in [redacted]Collection of Ethnographic Material Case Studies from Mutoko and Be[redacted]". Paper presented at the Third General Conference of the Southe[redacted]frican Development Cordination Conference Association of Museums (SADCCAM[redacted]ust, 1991, Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

23. Mvenge, "The Economic and Social Constraints".

24. See I.M. Lewis, "Historical Aspects of genealogies in N[redacted]ern Somali Social

Structure, "Journal of African History, 3, 1, (1962) [redacted];

M.G. Marwick, "History and Tradition in East Central [redacted]a Through the Cycles of the Northern Rhodesian Cewa". Journal of A[redacted]n History, 4,3, (1963), 375 - 390.;

Thomas Spear, "Traditional Myths and Historian's Myth[redacted]ariations on the Singwaya Theme of Mijikenda Origins", History in Afri[redacted], (1974) 67-82.

Thomas Spear, "Traditional Myths and Linguistic Analy[redacted] Singwaya Revisited," History in Africa, 4, (1977), 29.

25. See Z.K. Mathews, "Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs" Af[redacted] Social Research, 1, (1966) 94-95 Review article.

26. Thompson, "Afrikaner Nationalist Historiography", 128

27. Thomas Spear, "Oral Traditions: Whose History"? Hist[redacted]n Africa, 8, (1981), 165-181.

28. Spear, "Oral Traditions: Whose History"?, 169.

29. Daniel F. McCall, "Africa in Time Perspective: A Dis[redacted]on of Historical Reconstruction from Unwritten Sources. (New York, Ox[redacted] University Press, 1969) p.1.

30. McCall, "Africa in Time Perspective. p.3.

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