GENERAL TOPIC

West Africa: West Africa comprises perhaps half of the population South of the Sahara. Its historiography is fascinating for several reasons: it may well be the richest for any area south of the Sahara and the most diversified. There are more sources and more diverse sources for a longer timespan than elsewhere; much of the Black American cultural heritage stems from there. These reasons make it well suited for our topic.

Precolonial history: The precolonial period is an aspect of African history that is not fashionable for western historians in the 1980s, but continues to be crucial to the interests of most historians in Africa who recognize paramount importance for the modern African heritage. Reconstructing this past for many centuries has been most thorough in West Africa and such reconstructions are based on a great diversity of sources. This allows us to see retrospectively what the contributions and characteristics of various types of sources have been at different periods. We will be working mostly with the 16th to 18th centuries.

Oral history: Oral tradition is a phenomenon of interest to sociology (in its reflection of the present), psychologists (for its implications concerning the dynamics of memory) humanists (verbal and other performing arts) and historians (as sources). The role of such sources in historical reconstruction is to give the historian the present collective view of a social group with regard to its past. This is close enough to what happened to be taken seriously. Oral traditions are the only major category of sources which are the inside view, whether of the whole population, of an elite or of some submerged group. Oral tradition should therefore be taken as the first hypothesis concerning the past to be tried out in actual reconstruction. What now have these traditions in fact contributed to precolonial West African history is the core of our topic.

READING ORIENTATION


Methodology in reconstruction:


PAPERS

Two papers to be written, the first on the background of the case chosen, or a type of oral evidence; the second as assessment of the oral evidence used, its problems, its uses. Suggested topics are:

A. Case studies and actual use of oral tradition vs. other sources

1. Vol of history esp. Jolof  
   start Boubakar Barry +Ph.D. V. Bomba (Coifman)
2. What about Roots? Do Gambian traditions support the book?
3. Malik Sy, Bundu and early Jihads  
   sugg. Cahiers d'etudes africaines vol. 100, 1987
4. Macina.:  
   start with Ba and Daget and Ph.D. W. Brown
5. Segu and the Bamana kingdom  
   start with R. L. Roberts. Use Bazin, Meillassoux et al.
6. Northern Ghana (Gonja, Dagomba, Konkomba, etc.)  
   Societies in large parts of Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and nearby Mali are interesting but often require the use of German
7. Anyi cases. Ndenye or/and Sanwi  
   start with C. H. Perrot (Ndenye) H. Diabate (Sanwi)
8. Abron but only if 3 vol. Ph.D. of E. Terray is available
9. Igbo  
   start with Onweujogwu and Isiheir (Jos papers)
10. Kwararafo and the Benue project  
    start with Erim and with Shain (Etulo paper)
11. The Benin scheme. Dovetailing sources or not?
   start with Ryder, Bradbury, Ben Amos and Egharevba

   start with History in Africa 1987 (Andrew Apter)

13. Bariba
   start with Mercier

14. Gurma
   start with Madiega

B. Oral traditions actually used compared to the reconstruction made

1. Notation, performance, translation
   start with Williamson and Amali

2. The history of Niumi and a study of the traditions edited by Wright

3. The Delta Alagoas' histories and his texts

4. Asantesem and political biography
   start with Asantesem and its uses by the Wilks' school

5. The Mosi kingdoms
   use the Izard records

6. David Robinson, Oral Tradition and the Jihad of all Hajj 'Umar

C. Special characteristics: griots, cliches etc.

1. Griots and the history of Mali
   start with Steward, Niane and Sory Camara: Gens de la parole,
   Kouyate Namankumba, (Algiers). -or Soninke

2. Hunters in West African Oral Tradition
   start with Sheikh Tijaan Hayidara, La geste de Fanta Maa

3. Why Oral Tradition when there is literacy?
   start with J. Ewald Speaking Writing and Authority- Comp.
   Stud., Society

4. What happened to oral tradition in Sierra Leone and in Liberia?
   The cases of E. Tomkin and A. Jones

5. What about Chronology?
   start with Irwin and consensus in literature, then go over
   various chronological types in tradition and their
   exploitation. Use Erim Onjeowogwu as one extreme

   Use D. Henige's articles

D. The use of oral tradition for x type of history (military, art, etc.)

Make your own proposals.