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Nigeria is a bold testimony of a functional system of education established by our ancestors. The various sources of our past constitute an integral part of our cultural values which are synonymous with our ideas and feelings. These are accepted by the society at large as unquestioned assumptions. They serve as the basis for our ideals which we struggle to maintain as long as we are motivated by our traditions in this direction.

It is no wonder then that the aims we pursue are closely linked with the societal values, values which enable us to function as a corporate body and guarantee our existence. Our cultural values have close connections with the purposes and functions of our traditions and on no accounts could they be separated, hence the possibility of perpetuating the non-physical cultural heritage in Nigeria in the face of the corrosive influence of western civilization.

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different periods. These periods of rain and sunshine are given traditional names which either symbolise the rain, the dry season or the blossoming of certain food crops. Such names can even signify the appearance of certain birds or movements of some animals. Our ancestors have their methods of calculating their week days and the number of days that make up a month.

Each season or period is marked by one or several festivals because of certain natural phenomena that correspond directly with certain myths whether cultic or ritual. Thus celebration of a festival marks the beginning of a year from which months should be counted and weather conditions are studied. This is done upon their conviction that weather conditions are cyclical, so that another festival must be celebrated whenever the same weather condition recurs.<sup>27</sup> Children that are born during a festival are given names that remind them of the particular festival, for example, Abiodun, meaning he was born at a festival time.

Without wrist-watches or clocks, our ancestors devised some systems of reckoning time on daily basis. They could distinguish between dawn, morning, afternoon, evening and night. At times, the behaviour of certain animals or birds in their immediate environments served as the basis for reckoning time everyday. For example, the crowing of the cock and the positions of the sun were used in determining time, hence the usual mention of "the first cock crow," "the second cock crow," "the sun is high," "the sun is low." Time was also determined by the activities of some specialists in the society. For instance, the time when the palm wine tappers were out or were coming down from the palm trees were adopted for timing several other activities. Market days which bear local names were also very useful. These names could be those of some localities where markets were held or represented significant events.

There are some methods which were used in the past for calculating past periods although those periods are not definite but rather vague. Mention could be made of past periods in terms of what significant events accrued. For dating purposes, the following could be used - years of a reign, number of successive reigns, age grades, festivals, the foundation of a village at a certain site, the order of arrival of families from diverse directions in course of migration, etc.<sup>28</sup> Time was also measured in terms of genealogies. In some societies, principal historical events in order of occurrence could be used to reconstruct chronology and rationalize that the period of origin preceded the period of migrations, that the period of permanent settlement which followed, preceded the periods of political upheavals, social organization and the permanent establishment of a social system.

an area in Ibadan.

Epe-tedo = Epe (people) founded this community.

Ife-tedo = Ife (people) founded this area.

Ijesha-tedo = Ijesha (people) founded this community that is, an area in Lagos.

Apart from place names, there are also personal names that signify minor historical events that pertain to a family. For example:<sup>25</sup>

Enitan = A person about whose birth there is a story.

Oduntan = A year (famed in ) story.

Odunewu = a year of danger.

Okediji = The hill becomes a refuge.

Furthermore, there are royal genealogies, mythical genealogies and genealogies of Chiefs which tell some kind of history. Lists of rulers or key members of royal families can be used as historical data, when recited to offer some sociological explanation, to defend and vindicate rights and titles of individuals in the social framework. In general, genealogies help in explaining political and social relationship but mythical genealogies offer explanations on creation and confirm the pre-existing relationship between the supernatural and human beings. They throw some light on the origin of various social groups and enable us to establish a consistent chronology in the social development of our society. Mythical genealogies are useful in reconstructing history of ideas and religion and in the study of demographic development in pre-historic times.

### **Time Reckoning:**

The Nigeria peoples have their indigenous concept of measurement of time. According to customary practice, time has been divided on the basis of ecological or sociological data. Over a period of time a consistent study of recurrent natural phenomena guided our ancestors in fixing ecological time in order to regulate their activities. As these phenomena recurred year in and year out, certain activities were made to coincide with the time already set in a given environment. Thus they divided the year into two main seasons, that is, the rainy season and the dry season. differences in the amount of rain helped them to distinguish between the period of heavy rain and the period of light rain.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, fluctuations in the intensity of heat enabled our ancestors to sub-divide the dry season into



This proverb gives a graphic picture of two contrasting reigns in old Oyo empire, that is, that of Alafin Abiodun which was characterised by peace, order and prosperity as opposed to that of Alafin Aole that was marked by intrigues, crises and factional wranglings until the disintegration of the empire.<sup>20</sup>

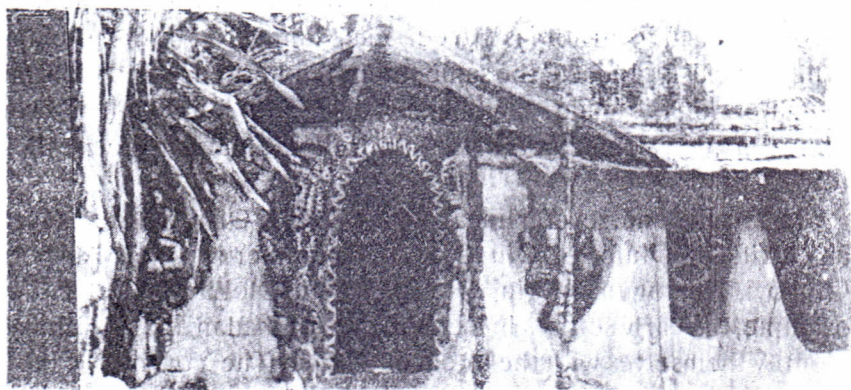
### **Festivals as Sources of History:**

Apart from their religious significance and social import, festivals can be described as the celebration of history. Many publishers have been preoccupied with innumerable Nigerian festivals.<sup>21</sup> Many of them have been filmed and documented in our archives. Instead of describing their structure and general characteristics, attention will be focused on their historical significance in enabling us to remember the past. Festivals are a medium of preserving our history and culture; they provide a simple and practical way of transmitting specific historical knowledge to all members of our society during the various celebrations. Apart from providing opportunities for people to worship the various divinities and pray for their blessings, they illustrate the details of historical events in form of drama. There is ample opportunity for mass participation in this form of drama, because traditionally, festival days are public holidays, when work is prohibited and markets are closed.<sup>22</sup> Each festival is concerned with a particular aspect of the past it tries to enact. When therefore festivals are studied, the various aspects of the past they describe can be synthesised into a local or national history. A few festivals that commemorate historical events include Edi festival in Ile-Ife Sango festival in Oyo, Egungun festival in Ibadan, Ogun festival in Ondo, etc.

### **Place names and Personal names:**

Place names that are used in the lore of Nigerian society have historical significance. They do remind people of the places passed through during the period of migration. They are in various categories. They could be sacred site or signify important historical events. In land disputes, place names have been very useful in finding solutions to entitlement to land and have offered some explanations to the course of migrations. Place names could be used as a source of information about the demographic structure of the past.<sup>23</sup> the following place names in Yoruba remind us of certain circumstances in the past that led to the founding of certain towns or quarters:-<sup>24</sup>

Eko-tedo = Eko (Lagos people) founded this area, that is,



The foregoing suggest the traditional method of conducting social studies among the various Yoruba groups. The cognomen attached to individuals suggest that they have general behavioural characteristics and that they presumably respond to external stimuli in the same way.

### **Proverb and Adages:**

Nigerian folktales are preserved and transmitted in proverbs, adages and pithy sayings. Various lists of the popular ones have been compiled by Nigerian Folklorists in different ethnic groups and have been published.<sup>19</sup> Pithy sayings and proverbs characterise the Nigerian speech and can be categorised according to the subject matter to which they relate directly either for education, counsel or reproof. They cover a wide range of subjects like arts, history, customs, war, taboo and various types of questions relating to antisocial practices, tributes to virtuous men and women, condemnation of theft and dishonesty. The elders are invariably the repository of proverbs and adages in the society. In the display of their knowledge of these proverbs, one cannot help commending their power of retentive memory. They intuitively employ the relevant proverbs to illustrate or expatiate on certain subjects in order to educate the youth about societal values and concepts. Indeed, there are proverbs about Nigerian ideas of cosmogony. The list is even inexhaustible because there are proverbs for everything, any occasion or practice.

Proverbs are also sources of history. There are some that present a graphic picture of what happened in the past although it is impossible to affix dates to the events they point to. A few historical proverbs will help to illustrate and confirm their usefulness as sources of history and means by which history is preserved. "Laiye Abiodun l'afi igba won owo. L'aiye Aole l'adi adikale." In Abiodun's reign money we weigh in bushels (or with calabashes). In Aole's reign, we packed up to flee.



Yoruba society therefore, each family is identified with its own totem through which its history is traced. Each family retains its totem as long as it exists. Indeed, the same totem is inherited by the sons and daughters of the male members of the same family. It is even obligatory that all members of the family should learn and recite their totem.

In Yorubaland, several lineages have similar Orile or totems such as Orile of Olufe, of Olu Oje, of Opomulero (Oyo), Aagberi, Olukoyi, Iremogun, Elerin, Olowu, Igbeti, Olokunesin, etc. For example, the early settlers in Yemetu area of Ibadan and Ogbomoso identify themselves with the totem of Oluoje. The Yorubas' of Ikoyi and some part of Ogbomosho also claim the totem of Olukoyi.<sup>16</sup>

Those who migrated from Orile-Owu to Abeokuta claim the totem Olowu while some Yoruba families in Ile-Ife and Oshogbo identify themselves with Olufe totem. Totems therefore narrate the stories of migrations, dispersals and separation of members of the same family, who inspite of their geographical spread still maintain or preserve similar cultural values and customary practices. In other words, totems help a lot in reconstructing the social history of our communities.<sup>17</sup>

Apart from family totems, there are cognomens or attributive names (Oriki) that are given to individuals in Yorubaland. A cognomen describes a person's personality, status and psychology whether dead or alive. A given cognomen of an ancestor will therefore inform us about the character and behaviour of that ancestor even though there is no written record that informs us accordingly. In Yorubaland, there is a system of attaching cognomens to certain personal names which are given at the time of birth but such attributes differentiate between males and females.

Again, praise singers do combine real personal names with cognomens and totems in an attempts to explain how culturally intergrated certain persons were in the history of their families. For example, personal names are combined with cognomens and totems as follows:-<sup>18</sup>

**Male:**

Personal Names	Cognomen	Totem
Adewale	Agana	Erin (Elephant)
Abiodun	Ajamu	Ogun (god of Iron)

**Female:**

Morenike	Abeje	Agan
Mowumi	Agbeke	Agbo
Ibisoto	Akanke	Iji



good leadership, impressive comportment and strict adherence to social and moral ideals that induced the people or elders in such societies to devise means of immortalising them. Therefore within the context of their historical experience and cultural background, myths are woven round such personalities or divinities as the case may be to instil fear into the body politic and enforce strict compliance with the relevant ritual processes and the recitation of religious poems or incantations.

Thus religion, as an integral part of life experience, has some story to tell the past. African religions have their institutions, structures and functions.<sup>12</sup> They inform us about the roles of the different functionaries attached to the various institutions, their rules and regulations and how disciplines are enforced.

Nigerian religions also inform us about the spiritual needs of man and how they were satisfied in the past. The various methods of spiritual engineering that were employed in the pristine times still have a bearing on the spiritual values of Nigerian today, hence the regular attention that is often paid to correct descriptive nomenclatures, basic terminologies, methods of meditation, ritual process and cultic recitals, in their classical original forms. It is no wonder then that the use of esoteric and symbolic terms, liturgy and religious songs are well preserved by only the devotees of particular divinities to the younger generations within their lineages. In a way therefore, religions embody the philosophy, theology and history of people.

Apart from the use of the religious systems as methods of preserving culture, folktales which are based on topical issues relating to current events are also employed in enforcing morals. Thus, there are innumerable folktales on crimes like stealing, adultery and societal attitude to cruelty, although no time dimension is attached to them. They however mirror the contemporary society.<sup>14</sup>

## **The Use of Lineage Totems;**

Totem in Yoruba literally means origin or foundation. Its use attests to the literary or artistic genius of the Yoruba. It is an important poetic device that is commonly used in tracing the line of ancestors and descent. Each family totem (or Orile) stands for a parent stock and when recited, represents a narrative of how the god of the family saved the life of its progenitor in times of danger. Such gods of the ancestors of the Yoruba lineages could be Elephants (Erin), the god of war (Ogun), post (Opo), a Ram, (Agbo), etc.<sup>15</sup> These gods are then worshipped according to prescribed procedure in appreciation of their protection and blessings to the families. In

elders in the society to get at the real meanings of the particular myths.<sup>7</sup> This is typified by Ifa mythology, and the myth of Oduduwa among the Yorubas, and also explains what historical events led to the adoption of Chameleon, Elephant or Pantheon, etc., as family totems or totemic ancestors.<sup>8</sup> Among the Igbo, Ijaw and Edo people, similar symbolic representations and personification of abstractions characterise local myths.

### **Legends:**

There are stories of real human beings that existed in the past and who are well remembered for either their notoriety or popularity in the society. Owing to their unusual behaviour and supernatural powers, they are deified and worshipped as gods. For purposes of religious ceremony, rituals and the need to pay homage to them, certain myths are woven round their personalities to enhance their dignity. There are prevalent anecdotes and chronicles which are fantastic accounts of what heroes and heroines did in the various communities, for example, Moremi/Olorogbo legend; the Onoja epic among the Igbo and Idoma people, etc., the legend of Sango, and Elenre in Oyo Empire.<sup>9</sup>

The legend of Sango, the fourth Alafin of Oyo presented his picture as a man very skillful in the sleight of hand and fond of emitting fire from his mouth. He caused thunder and lightening which destroyed his neighbourhood in Oyo. He eventually hanged himself to show remorse.<sup>10</sup> There is also the popular legend of Elenre in Oyo which described him as an invincible medicine man. When he was beheaded by Ajaka, one Alafin of Oyo, his head landed on Alafin's lap from where the head continued to consume the food and water meant for Ajaka. Eventually, the head turned into a stream that flows from Ajaka's palace and is known as Elenre's river (Odo Elenre in Yoruba) in Oyo to this day.<sup>11</sup>

### **Religion and History:**

Among various ethnic groups in Nigeria, are several divinities whose histories are well known by their devotees and priests or priestesses. There are historical accounts of such gods as Ogun, Obatala, Oya, Osun, and Sango among the Yoruba which inform people in symbolic terms how formal relationships were established between them and the gods. Without doubt, African religions facilitated the establishment of modes of worship which emphasise various aspects of the past. Indeed, deified heroes or heroines in some communities were individuals who must have done or left something of immense historical significance and must have been credited with



didactic in nature. There are ritual myth, the myth of origin, the cult myth, the prestige myth and eschatological myth.<sup>4</sup> These myths have been diffused and transmitted in different languages because of centuries of migration, inter-group relations and cultural assimilation.

Many scholars have been preoccupied with the definitions of myths, their structures, patterns and functions. Myths are pre-historic methods of explaining significant historical events in a locality, which people believe to be true, but which cannot be explained in any other way. Such oral accounts about the deeds of gods or supernatural beings concerning the creation of the world, human beings and animals in the mythical period or sacred past. Thus in the distant past, myths enabled people to find answers to how the relationship between human beings and the gods or the Supreme God was established, and what were the mutual obligations that were expected from them. This is a cosmogonic myth. Apart from containing the sacred lores of a people, myths form the basis of the people's theology. Thus, myths are good sources of information on the earliest religious history and a systems of beliefs, rituals, religious poems, hymns and prayers.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, most relevant to the subject of this paper is the historical myth which is concerned with founders of Towns, and Kingdoms, the cultural ideals they enforced on their societies, their sacred laws and their deification by their descendants. Thus various ethnic groups in Nigeria (even throughout Africa) preserve certain myths which help in sustaining their cultural values and attitude of life because of the necessity to adhere strictly to the ways of their progenitors. Historical myths relate to events of the mythical period that is not remembered, that is, the period of history that goes back into the distant and remote past, when, according to general belief, there was perfect order and peace in the society because of man's cordial and obedient relationship with God.<sup>6</sup> This means that Africans did not wait for the white man to educate him about the creation of the world or the existence of God and the appearance of man on earth. Africans have their own myths by which they could also educate the white man concerning the cosmos, natural phenomena, the divinities and their influence on African societies.

However, a significant characteristic of myths must be highlighted for a meaningful understanding of them. This is in relation to the wide spread use of metaphorical symbolism in each local dialect. Concrete images or characters are created out of abstract imagination. Certain symbols or some named characters could represent abstract ideas or principles. In this way, ancient ideas or hypotheses are preserved in a coded language which could only be deciphered by the



are trained by their predecessors, to recite the history of the community at public ceremonies. This form of specialisation has become well established as a source of history.

The genealogists memorise and recite the list of past kings and their achievements while the memorialists specialise in the recollection of the most important events of the various reigns. Such recitations can be didactic specifically to the reigning Oba or Chief and the members of the royal family. The memorialists could counsel the Oba to emulate the virtues and good leadership of some past Obas or warn him against adopting rash decisions that could be likened to those that resulted in the tyrannical rule of certain Obas in the past. There are also rhapsodists who preserve various panegyrics on the past kings while the royal drummers and trumpeters relate some aspects of the local history.<sup>2</sup> There are other royal functionaries like the priests and priestesses of the local gods who preserve religious traditions and beliefs ensuring accuracy of transmission.

For the preservation of all these traditions, there is an indigenous machinery for control in terms of sanctions and rewards. Those who are credited with accurate repetition are rewarded, while those who omit or distort them suffer some punishments in form of certain sanctions which are imposed on them. This machinery for control suggests therefore, the existence of a body of experts who listen attentively to the recital during any public ceremony at which the Oba or his representative presides, either to certify the accuracy of the recitation or detect some errors. The king himself may even join his court functionaries in judging the accuracy of such recitals because at his accension to the throne he is required by tradition to learn and master the general outline of the history of his society as well as the names of his predecessors.

Closely related to the aforementioned traditions at the Oba's court, are the esoteric ones whose transmission is exclusively reserved for a class of experts like the Priests, Priestesses and Kingmakers.<sup>3</sup> These experts could be heads of certain political or religious institutions. On no account should they be transmitted by anyone outside their institutions.

## **Myths:**

There are various kinds of myths in traditional African Society which serve as vehicles for transmitting cultural heritage from one generation to another and through which aspects of African culture have been well preserved till today in spite of the corrosive impact of modernism. Each myth performs particular functions although, some combine religious with historical functions, while others are

# THE TRADITIONAL METHODS OF PRESERVING HISTORY AND CUSTOMS

*A. A. Lawal*

**T**his paper takes stock of the major forms of expressing the non-physical cultural heritage in Nigeria and the various methods or devices that are employed to safeguard this heritage which is facing the danger of disappearing because of the destructive forces of time and uncontrolled modernisation.

There are many aspects of life experiences which Nigerian traditional practices describe. For historical purposes therefore, several techniques and methods have been developed to preserve and transmit the various aspects of life of our ancestors. The fact that these traditions are still sustained, despite the steady encroachment of foreign cultures, religions and ideas, underlies the significance of historical experience in terms of what functions it performs in the life of Nigerians.

Despite the obvious lack of any system of writing, the various communities adopted certain methods and techniques to preserve their traditions as faithfully as possible and transmit them from generation to generation. This implies that there is a formal system of training and transmission. In other words, there are certain groups of specialists to whom such traditions are entrusted. These groups not only exercised certain control over the traditions, but ensured accurate transmission.<sup>1</sup>

Traditions that are within the ambit of such specialists include Genealogy, Totems, Ifa poetry (Yoruba), Historical myths, Legends, etc.

These specialists often perform their functions under the auspices of traditional rulers or chiefs. Indeed, such traditions that are under strict control are not for popular consumption. Instead, they are only recited during occasional public ceremonies when the Obas or Chiefs preside. This is exemplified by the Yoruba practice whereby an institution is created in the royal Palace where the specialists are employed and maintained as teachers of traditions. Their non-hereditary offices are very important in the political frame work of every Yoruba Community.

Thus in a typical royal Palace, there are bards, genealogists, memorialists, and rhapsodists. At the accession of a new ruler, they could be replaced with a new set of specialists, depending on the policy of the new ruler. It would therefore be necessary that the new set of specialists

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