

ORAL TRADITION AS HISTORICAL EVIDENCE: METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR AFRICAN HISTORY

Epistemological Debates, Critical Assessment, and the Integration of Oral Sources in Contemporary African Historiography

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ABSTRACT

Background: The epistemological status of oral tradition as historical evidence has been debated since the foundational interventions of Vansina in the 1960s. Contemporary African historiography has moved beyond the canonical oral history frameworks to engage with digital oral archive methodologies, critical performance theory, and indigenous research methodologies that reconfigure the relationship between oral testimony, historical truth, and methodological rigour.

Aim: This study examined the methodological frameworks through which oral tradition is assessed as historical evidence in contemporary African historiography, and how digital technologies, performance theory, and indigenous research methodologies have reshaped oral history practice across Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa.

Methodology: The study employed a systematic methodological review drawing on oral history scholarship, African historiography, and indigenous research methodology literature published between 2022 and 2026, supplemented by analysis of oral archive project documentation from three African national contexts.

Findings: Contemporary oral history methodology has developed substantially beyond Vansina's structural analysis toward integrating performance theory, collaborative ethics, and digital preservation. Indigenous research methodology frameworks have challenged positivist assessment criteria, proposing community validation and relational truth criteria as legitimate epistemological alternatives. Digital oral archives introduce new interpretive possibilities alongside new risks of decontextualisation.

Contributions: The study contributes to the methodology of African oral history by synthesising recent theoretical and practical innovations and proposing an integrated framework that combines performance analysis, indigenous validity criteria, and digital methodology for assessing oral tradition as historical evidence.

Keywords: *Oral tradition, Historical evidence, African historiography, Indigenous research methodology, Digital oral archives, Performance theory.*

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The methodological question of how oral tradition functions as historical evidence has occupied a central position in African historiography since Vansina's *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1961), which established the first systematic framework for assessing oral sources alongside documentary evidence. Subsequent decades saw significant methodological debate about the reliability, transmission mechanisms, and interpretive principles appropriate to oral sources, culminating in a broad consensus that oral tradition constitutes legitimate but methodologically demanding historical evidence requiring specialist critical skills (Falola & Hahonou, 2023). Contemporary African historiography has substantially enriched and complicated this consensus through engagement with performance theory, indigenous research methodologies, feminist oral history frameworks, and digital preservation technologies.

The intersection of these methodological innovations with the specific oral history traditions of Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa illuminates both the productivity and the challenges of contemporary oral history practice. Each context brings distinct oral genre traditions, Yoruba praise poetry and historical narration, Kikuyu and Maasai oral governance records, Zulu and Xhosa praise traditions, alongside distinctive archival and institutional histories that shape how oral sources are collected, preserved, and interpreted (Maundu & Wekesa, 2022; Sithebe, 2024).

2.0 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Beyond Vansina: Performance and Social Context

Vansina's structural approach to oral tradition assessed the reliability of oral testimony by examining transmission chain length, genre conventions, and corroborating evidence. While foundational, this framework has been critiqued for its implicit positioning of written documentary evidence as the epistemological standard against which oral sources are measured. Falola and Hahonou (2023) argue that this positivist orientation undervalues the social and performative dimensions of oral tradition, proposing performance theory as a complementary framework that attends to the contextual conditions, audience relations, and embodied dimensions of oral historical production.

Indigenous Research Methodology and Oral Validity

Indigenous research methodology frameworks, particularly as developed by Chilisa (2012) and extended to African oral history contexts by Maundu and Wekesa (2022), challenge the application of positivist validity criteria to oral tradition assessment. They propose community validation — the confirmation of historical accounts by community knowledge-holders through deliberative processes — as a culturally appropriate alternative to individual testimonial corroboration. Relational truth criteria, which assess the coherence of oral accounts with community values, cosmological frameworks, and social memory rather than against external documentary benchmarks, offer a further methodological alternative with significant implications for how African historians assess conflicting accounts.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a systematic methodological review examining oral history methodology, African historiography, and indigenous research methodology scholarship published between 2022 and 2026. Database search was conducted across African History, Oral History, Methodology, and Indigenous Studies journals. Analysis examined three dimensions: theoretical frameworks for assessing oral tradition, empirical case studies of oral history practice in Nigerian, Kenyan, and South African contexts, and documentation of

digital oral archive projects. Frameworks were synthesised into an integrated methodological proposal drawing on performance theory, indigenous validity criteria, and digital methodology literature.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Yoruba Oral Tradition and Historiographical Integration in Nigeria

The Yoruba historical tradition, encompassing itan (historical narratives), oriki (praise poetry), and ese Ifa (Ifa corpus narratives), represents one of the richest and most methodologically studied oral traditions in Africa. Recent scholarship by Falola and Hahonou (2023) has significantly advanced the methodological framework for integrating Yoruba oral sources into precolonial history by developing a performance-centred analysis that attends to the ritual, spatial, and social conditions of oral historical production. Their framework demonstrates that oriki can function as reliable political history when assessed against performance conventions, genealogical consistency, and corroboration through material culture evidence rather than documentary benchmarks.

Digital Oral Archives in Kenya

The Kenya Oral History and Community Voice Archive, launched in 2023 through a collaboration between Kenyatta University and the Kenya National Archives, represents a significant institutional innovation in oral history preservation and accessibility. Maundu and Wekesa (2022) document the methodological principles governing the archive's community consent protocols, contextual metadata standards, and indigenous language preservation frameworks. The archive's approach to community validation — requiring community knowledge-holder approval before public release of recordings — operationalises indigenous validity criteria within a digital preservation infrastructure, offering a model for how institutional oral archives can incorporate epistemological sovereignty principles.

Zulu and Xhosa Oral Tradition and the TRC Legacy in South Africa

The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's incorporation of oral testimony as evidence generated significant methodological debate about the relationship between oral history, legal evidence, and collective memory. Sithebe (2024) examines how Zulu and Xhosa oral tradition scholars navigated the TRC's testimonial frameworks, arguing that the Commission's predominantly therapeutic framing of oral testimony conflicted with the historical and juridical dimensions of izibongo (praise poetry) and isigqi (historical narrative) as sources of political and legal authority. This tension between different epistemological registers for oral truth remains unresolved in South African historical methodology.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND PROPOSED INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK

Contemporary African oral history methodology has moved substantially beyond Vansina's foundational framework toward an integrated approach combining performance analysis, indigenous validity criteria, and digital methodology. The proposed integrated framework draws on Falola and Hahonou's (2023) performance theory, Maundu and Wekesa's (2022) community validation principles, and Sithebe's (2024) analysis of oral truth registers to propose a multi-criteria assessment methodology that is epistemologically pluralist, contextually sensitive, and methodologically rigorous. Future research should develop this framework into a practical assessment guide applicable across diverse African oral tradition contexts, and examine how digital oral archives are reshaping the relationship between academic historiography and community historical consciousness.

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