

# Deconstructing The Conundrum in the Historiography of Acephalous Societies in Nigeria 1900-1990

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ijhphr.13/vol12n1119>

Published April 1, 2024

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**Citation:** Okoko C.O., Oforji K.C. and Hanachor F.C. (2024) Deconstructing The Conundrum in the Historiography of Acephalous Societies in Nigeria 1900-1990, *International Journal of History and Philosophical Research*, Vol.12, No.1, pp.1-19

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**ABSTRACT:** *An ambivalent appellation, acephalousness or non-centrality led to misinterpretations of the political systems and structures of Nigerian societies that obviously were not as professionalized as those in the erstwhile Empires and Emirates. Yet, the acephalous societies had political structures as much as the centralized ones. From the times of David Hume, Friedrich Hegel through to Hugh-Trevor Roper, African history faced distortions; and presented as unworthy of any kind of academic study. This was, unarguably, a crop-up from a Eurocentric misperception and misconception whereof Africa became labelled the “Dark Continent: waiting to be discovered by Europeans. Seemingly a justification of the colonization of Africa, African historians, nonetheless, became challenged to the best approaches in writing her history. Another challenge was the misconception that documentation or written history was the only acceptable history. Arab/Muslim scholars effectively covered the socio-political and economic activities in the centralized societies where they found employment as scribes or chroniclers. This study, first, attempted grasping at the contents, perspectives and methodology of African history; second, it examined the challenges inherent in the study of acephalous or stateless societies and, third, provided ample ways of addressing the challenges. The findings revealed that beyond written documents, oral traditions and the application of the interdisciplinary*

*research approach were integral and indispensable parts in the historiography of African societies, especially of the acephalous. Using the primary and secondary sources, the study concluded that in spite of the limitations of oral traditions, they remained indispensable in interrogating the history of acephalous societies.*

**KEYWORDS:** Acephalous, stateless, ambivalent, misconception, oral traditions, centralized, historiography.

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## INTRODUCTION

Perhaps, in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at the present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness ... and darkness is not the subject of history (H. Trevor-Roper, 1963:87).

In another obvious racial outburst, Trevor-Roper said that:

African history is nothing but barbaric gyrations in grotesque and irrelevant corners of the globe.

This paper is divided into three parts. The study, first, attempted grasping at the contents, perspectives and methodology of African history; second, it examined the challenges inherent in the study of acephalous or stateless societies and, third, provided ample ways of addressing the challenges. The appellation 'acephalous' or 'stateless' was coined by Eurocentric scholars to denote the backwardness or otherwise of the lack of history in Africa. The sheer bias of non-existence of African history and Africa as not historically part of the world were the contentions of scholars, such as Hugh Trevor-Roper and David Hume. These attempts seemingly relegated Africa to the bottom rung of history.

Acephalous or non-centralized Societies are where the institutions for the organization of the day-to-day activities are less concentrated and non-specialist. Their recognition by the people they govern is marginal, except, of course, in times of need, such as wars. The people, in turn, do not owe any direct obligation to them. The governed often resort to oracular interventions, negotiations or engage in outright warfare when disputes arise (G. O. Olusanya, 1984: 10). But in the centralized societies, authority rests on full-time specialists, who unlike the chiefs in non-centralized societies are so preoccupied with state functions that they hardly engage in other activities, such as farming and time consuming domesticities. The rulers here are not remembered only when danger knocks but occupy a central position in the affairs of society, in fact, as the sole arbiters. In some centralized societies, such as Benin, the Oba was regarded as divine. It is not being suggested here that centralized societies are solely dependent on the activities of specialist individuals and, thus, peculiar to them, but that such individuals could be found in them. Moreover, there are other factors, such as commercial activities, complexity of the economy and

geographical location that account for centrality of states. These are not, again, peculiar to the centralized societies. Thus, there are similarities between non-centralized and centralized societies (Robin Horton, 1971: 72).

Non-centralization does not imply the absence of political structures and engaging in commercial activities that could lead to the accumulation of capital and, subsequently, to state formation. From the present distribution of non-centralized societies, they tend to be located away from the major trade routes. But it must be pointed out that in pre-colonial times; it was not all the non-centralized societies that found themselves on trade routes that developed into centralized societies. Rehearsing Gloria Emeagwali's 'Groundwork Perspective' (1982) in which it is contended that the development of centralized societies does not depend on any individual or on a group of individuals, there are other obvious factors that could accelerate centralization. When non-centralized societies are situated on trade routes there would be a general involvement in trade. As time goes on, a group of individuals are bound to accumulate more surpluses than others. Such individuals in village assemblies, for instance, are easily recognizable and their suggestions for the well-being of the society have never been taken for granted. This hypothesis furthers that they will continue the accumulation of surpluses and with time start making decisions in running the affairs of societies. This will lead to the emergence within the socio-economic matrix of the society of a dominant class who will like to defend their interests and equally moderate conflicts in the society. This is tantamount to political practice and authority. Succinctly put, they have acquired economic power through surplus accumulation and political authority since they are now in a position to moderate conflicts. With time, these would evolve into political specialists who constitute the apparatuses of government. They would also introduce coercive organs, such as the army, police and courts to suppress those who might not want to adhere to their schemas. Of course, they will collect revenues to maintain themselves and these organs, in the form of taxes (in cash and in kind).

Contrary to the long-held thesis, it was not all centralized societies that were located on trade routes. Some grew by taxing traders who passed through their territories. Thus, the role of commerce in the development of centralized societies cannot be overestimated. Nonetheless, some societies in pre-colonial Eastern Nigeria participated in the long distance trade, had political structures, and accumulated capital, yet, could not become centralized. There are some communities in pre-colonial Igboland, such as the Nri and Aro, who participated extensively in commerce and even had military and oracular backings, but could evolve into states. The position here is that it is not trade that transforms non-centralized societies into centralized ones but the presence of facilitators (individuals) who will appropriate these surpluses to develop into states. The reasons for the societies remaining non-centralized have been attributed to the fact they practiced subsistence agriculture, had non-specialized political apparatuses and lacked in the broadest sense the backing of organs of coercion, such as the police and army. It cannot be explained away

by saying they could not evolve into centralized states because they were located away from trade routes; in fact, they were even found in-between centralized societies.

### **Reasons for the Neglect of Non-centralized Societies by Erstwhile Chroniclers**

Unarguably, commerce played an important part in the development of centralized Societies since being situated on trade routes or near them attracted many traders, artisans, travelers, adventurers and scholars. In pre-colonial times, these visitors who were mainly trading merchants always found it profitable settling in the centralized societies. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD, Arabized Berbers ventured across the Sahara for trade and for the spread of Islam. Among them were scholars who were well-versed in Islamic theology and administrative principles. Moreover, they were assumed to possess the magical 'Jinn'. The expert advices from the scholars on economic and administrative matters endeared them to the rulers of the kingdoms of the Sahel/Savannah and forest zones who most of the times involved them in the direct administration of their states in the capacities of secretaries and treasurers.

Some of the Muslim scholars who had acquired the art of writing in the Muslim world became palace chroniclers; and documented events in them. Rulers in Western Sudan, such as Idris Alooma and the Caliphs generally, commissioned some of them to write their biographies and the history of their kingdoms. Thus, they wrote about trading activities and on centres of Islamic learning, such as Kano, Timbuktu, Jenne and Sokoto - then the capital of the Fulani Empire (Emeagwali, 1982). Leo Africanus (Muhammed al-Fasi) described Timbuktu as a centre of learning where there were many magistrates, doctors and men of religion; and of the king's affluence and army. Ibn Batuta told of his tortuous journey across the Sahara to Mali Empire, but left enviable records about the empire. Arabic scholars, such as Al-Bakri and Al-Idrisi wrote about the Old Ghana Empire (Robin Hallet, 170: 4). These kingdoms were regarded as making history since they caused concerted inter-group and diplomatic relations. But since the non-centralized polities were not engaged in rigorous trading activities and did not provide conducive environment for the operation of the immigrant Islamic scholars were not regarded as making history and consequently neglected. The result was a huge collection of historical records on the socio-political and economic activities of these kingdoms, such as on their king lists, military exploits and trading relations; and none on the so-called stateless societies (Basil Davidson, 1974: 78).

Pre-colonial European explorers, traders, geographers, ethnographers and missionaries were equally attracted to these kingdoms and additionally produced maps, and wrote article and books on them. A notable explorer, Henrich Barth, wrote extensively on Kano Horton, (1971: 73). Although the works by pre-colonial Arabs and Europeans are patchy and poor in geographical coverage, they, at least, provided a historical base for the study of these kingdoms.

The pre-colonial non-centralized societies were not duly recorded as the centralized ones by Arab scholars. Even when colonial rule was established, the explorers and missionaries laid more emphasis on the centralized states. It was equally easier for the British during the imposition of colonial rule to establish the 'Indirect Rule System' through the monarchs of these kingdoms. The write-ups on these kingdoms or centralized societies had some glaring shortcomings: they were mainly concerned with their (both Arabs and Europeans) activities and contacts in Africa. The write-ups provided by the colonizing authorities were essentially on administrative matters and not the full-fledged histories of the societies. However, a few oral histories recorded them are found in Intelligence Reports.

The description of Africa by Trevor-Roper and Hegel as being no historical part of the world, motivated African historians in the 1950s and 1960s to the writing of the histories of empires that were conceived as having made history. Each tended to trace the origin of some of these West African Kingdoms to Egypt, to show that at least they were connected with one of the first cradles of civilization. Even some African communities, such as the Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria, is said to have a Jewish origin. Described as a dive into European archives, early African historians did some scissors-pasting of the articles written by those early travellers and scholars into a seeming African history. Though some of these manuscripts on African history have been accessed, the fact remains that the bulk of African history are yet to be recovered, written or studied. In the frenzy at the recovery of the last vestiges of African societies, especially the 'stateless' ones rages, it must be pointed out that the history of the centralized states cannot be summarized as the history of Africa.

The students of African history have been faced with the challenge of writing the history of the non-centralized states hitherto made "insignificant" in all its complexities. At this time, African studies had become a subject of academic interest in her academic institutions. Departments for its study were started in many African Universities, and even overseas. The Africanists undertook this venture with zeal. But they were immediately faced with obstacles in their attempts at writing the histories of non-centralized societies. There were no written materials to be consulted. Some scholars, including Africans, trained in Western historiography regarded the study of non-centralized societies as a waste of time. It was unimaginative to begin writing the history of a place not yet in print. They argued that such a work, if ever produced, would amount to a bundle of guesswork. Yet, there are many things in the past that are unknown. Should the heavy work envisaged in this task depreciate their importance? Robin Hallet (1970: 6) has pointed out that: "To brood too long on these limitations is simply to discourage action".

In writing about these kingdoms, during the era of historical 'propaganda and trumpeting' of a glorious African past, they more or less used the Western methods of historiography. However, a new methodology was needed in the presence of a new source of historical data - oral traditions, with which the history of non-centralized societies could be written.

Equally, the oral traditions adjudged invaluable in reconstructing the African past, especially the acephalous societies, had inherent problems. Finding solutions to the problems and making oral data acceptable are discussed in the next section of this paper.

### **Some Possible Solutions to the Problems of Writing the History of Acephalous Societies**

Although not peculiar in writing the history of non-centralized societies, the only readily available source to the African Student or historian are oral traditions. In as much as oral traditions are laden with problems, it has become urgent that they should be collected, analyzed and stored as historical documents. This is because we cannot ensure the preservation of oral traditions in the minds of aging men and women who are losing their memories. This is in addition to the changing socio-cultural patterns of societies: a move from tradition to modernity.

### **What are Oral Traditions?**

Oral traditions are oral testimonies concerning the past that have passed through a chain of oral transmissions from person to person and from generation to generation. It must be such that it will at least show some authenticity with rumours and intercalations sifted out of them through the techniques of reconstructing history (Hallet, 1970: 13). Oral traditions have been categorized into broad forms against the fact that different societies have evolved means and methods of knowing what are important to them and have given names to certain things as pertains to their societies. Various forms of oral traditions, regarded as vital in reconstructing the African past and embracing all the unique forms of oral traditions have been delineated and categorized as the theoretical form (Jan Vansina, 1967: 57). These theoretical categories are:

- i. The **Formulae** are titular or titles, slogans, didactic and ritual. The titular are political and ritual names, all having historical meanings derived from the family, lineage and historical ancestors. The slogans are often statements or short expressions which are used to portray the lives of the community in its aspirations in the past, while the didactic formulae are those statements which are intended to instruct, show riddles and proverbs. Ritual formulae are embracive of incantations that are exclusively for ritual ceremonies and often performed by initiates.
- ii. **Poetry**, which in turn has many forms. In African societies, poetry is often in the form of songs and often recited but not unnecessarily. The use of poetry was common in empires for the praising of rulers and heroes. Poems are divided into two classes. First, is the aesthetic which makes historians think it is not very useful and second, is that part of the poem that deals with the founding of particular communities. The problem with poetry is that the words are fixed, often archaic and must be transmitted intact. At times, the narrator does not always know what the wordings actually mean.
- iii. The **List** which embodies place and personal names, portraying roots and routes of migrations. This is usually the case among societies that have been preoccupied, such



as the Igbo and Edo, with dispersal from a common heartland (Jan Vansina, 1967: 57). The personal names are for tracing genealogies. King lists found in states and empires are included in the personal names;

- iv. **Tales** which are purely artistic materials sometimes referred to as orature. The tales must be in accordance with a people's culture. They are of direct significance and most reliable. "Pre-literate and pre-scientific peoples made rational attempts through myths, to make sense of their world" (E. J. Alagoa, 1978: 9). Tales deal with the societies' fundamental realities. It is aetiological and tells us why things happened the way they did. In African communities, myths are regarded as sacred and as such cannot be told in an improper way. Defaulting in not rendering tales appropriately has often attracted penalties or even death; and
- v. The largest body of oral tradition is in the form of **prose narrative commentaries**. This is tradition obtained through commentaries that deal with legal precedents, the explanatory and occasional commentaries by rulers (P. Stevens Jnr., 1978: 21).

Although the various forms of oral traditions have been examined and advances made in their application, they cannot be taken at their face value because further problems have always come to the fore. For instance, although written documents have problems, they are not subject to the elision of human memory. They continue to change as the years pass by and as the individual face new experiences. These could lead to distortions, which have made those concerned with the new African historiography to be challenged to a definition of their methodologies and the validity of their effort. But before defining the methodologies, it will be worthwhile mentioning some of the problems of oral traditions.

Some historians have argued that oral traditions have been subject to structuring and restructuring as new people come to power. Thus, they have been referred to as charter for the political offices of the communities making oral traditions to be present-oriented rather than past reflective. In Igboland, from the last decade, there have been cases of chieftaincy struggles and each of the contending groups has successfully traced their origin to the supposed ancestor of the place. However, we cannot divorce the present from the past. It is only left to the academic historian to detect falsifications and subject his materials to acceptable historical techniques.

In preliterate societies where the storage of information depended on memory, there was always the problem of the failure of memory. The human memory could be influenced by new commentaries, rumours and premeditated intercalations aimed at misleading people. These cannot be part of the oral traditions of a people since it has become tampered with to achieve a personal or group objective. However, the sustenance of oral traditions could be done through frequency of repetitions during which place and personal names are recited. Recitations are mostly performed during ceremonies, such as coronations and funerals. In some communities, especially in Yorubaland, there are specialists who must

undergo many years of apprenticeship before practice. They are called the Baba Alawo and use mnemonic devices like talking drums and xylophones as accompaniments during recitations. When it involves rituals, wrong recitations could attract the wrath of the gods or ancestors and the death penalty for falsifying king lists. There are also monuments, regalia and tombs, regarded as milestones that point to specific and significant events in time. In full recognition of the preponderance and importance of oral tradition, Erim and Uya (1984: 10-11) and Alagoa (1978: 9) have posted that oral traditions in spite of teething problems encountered in their usage remain a phenomenal development in methodology and technique in African historiography. Oral tradition has won wide recognition as a valid source for historical reconstruction.

Erim and Uya (1984) consequently reviewed totems as methodological devices in historical reconstruction nexus the usages to which oral tradition could be put. Categorizing three types of totems, namely, primary or kinship, secondary or political and tertiary or economic types, they argue that societies have been found to be totem-synonymous which have constantly reminded individuals of an ever expanding sphere of social relations in his clan and kindred until the final group or sub-group which forms the most probable recognized level of kinship emerges. This also requires that an individual must have certain information about his heritage. The totem is one of such heritages. Thus, the primary or kinship totem could be used to reconstruct a theory of origins of ethnic groups in any geographical region of the world. The other two types of totemic relationships can occur when two unrelated groups adopt a totem as the basis for recognition. From a broader perspective, totems provided the fulcrum for sustained social, economic and political links between states and peoples in pre-colonial times, which formed the structural bases of the predecessors of modern nation states in Africa (Olusanya, 1984: 39). The African historian has so much depended on anthropological analysis and, often times, did not regard as important a factor of totemism. *Inter alia*, G. O. Olusanya (1984) bemoaned that:

The tragedy of African historians, therefore, is failure to realize (and when they do) to practice what others outside the discipline have realized long ago and that is that history is a powerful instrument for forging unity of peoples and inspiring them to greater heights.

The dependence on oral traditions to establish a chronology for African history remains a fruitless venture, especially in constructing the history of non-centralized societies. There has always been the problem of memory elision vis-à-vis remembering the events of the past. In practice, only few oral traditions go back to dates beyond 1200-1500 AD. Even the documented ones do not cover much time since, for instance, recording in West African history started about the 10th Century (Olusanya, 1984: 14).



Having pointed out the problems inherent in oral traditions, they cannot totally invalidate them. Oral traditions are an essential storehouse for historical data for African historians, who have adopted them as techniques towards their usage. They have employed basic steps in the use of oral traditions, such as collection, documentation and interpretation or the writing of history. Yet, the historians are faced with other problems that transcend the realm of their discipline, and thus, have resorted to the interdisciplinary research approach. But before considering the interdisciplinary approach, it will be important to discuss the basic steps that have been adopted as means of finding solutions to the problems inherent in the writing of the histories of non-centralized societies.

The Collection of oral traditions must be systematically and scientifically done, taking notes of the cultural, social, religious, political and economic aspects of the peoples' lives; and if possible, their language. It will be a credit to the historian if he is a native speaker of the language of the people whose history is being written. During fieldwork, it has been suggested, and has indeed become the tradition, that many versions of oral traditions should be collected from the same community and from different persons in the community. If it concerns a particular community, other neighboring communities' traditions will be collected in order to establish a comparative basis and justify claims made by the community you are studying. If a community in Igboland, for instance, claims a Benin area origin, it will also require going to Benin to conduct oral interviews. The names, ages and experiences of the informants must be recorded too because these will help in assessing the time coverage and validity of traditions collected. However, some elderly men are not more informed than their juniors in some communities (field experience). This goes to justify an adage that states that it is he/she who was awake at night, and not the eldest, that would be asked after the events of the night.

The next step, which is **documentation**, goes hand-in-hand with the collection of oral traditions. The researcher here uses tapes, waxing and even photography in recording his information. Re-echoing Vansina (1967: 63), the data collected and documented must lend credence to the final result of the research. The historian here faces the problem of availability of recording equipment and the maintenance of the tapes used since they are subject to wears from frequent use and weather.

The next is **transcription** which requires a good knowledge of linguistic techniques and orthography, even when the researcher is an indigene. Here, if the historian does not have interdisciplinary orientation will while collecting and analyzing oral traditions definitely give wrong interpretations and draw misleading inferences.

The last step involves the **interpretation** of the data collected before writing. It will be recalled that the cultural, economic, social and political aspect of a people are recorded during collection. This then requires that the services of scholars that are well vexed in the

descriptions of these other aspects of society come into play. The limitation now confronting the historian, which he has been able to discern, makes his work easier. He must, therefore, resort to means to curb these limitations and achieve reliability; and would entail a resort to non-narrative sources. This will entail contributions by scholars and students from other disciplines, such as archaeology, linguistics, biology and cultural anthropology (ethnography). The results got from these other disciplines will be compared with that got from oral traditions. Reacting to the exciting results got from the use of oral tradition and the deployment of the interdisciplinary research approach, A. E. Afigbo (1984: 54) advised African historians to be wary of undue emotionalism and sterile skepticism; and said that:

The wide-ranging and laudable concern for the methodology of oral tradition has not only helped to point out the centrality of oral tradition as a source for the history of Africa especially of Black Africa, in the pre-colonial period or even in the colonial period. It has also made all would be exploiters of this source alert to its major pitfalls.

In his studies, G. I. Jones (1963: 24), itemized two types of oral traditions, namely, those which refer to the recent past (TRRP) and those that refer to the distant past (TRDP); and opined that those that refer to the recent past are more valuable than those information from the distant past, especially when used in conjunction with other written European records. Robin Horton (1971: 78-90), on his own, insists that oral traditions can only become viable if its indications are considered along those of “linguistic maps, culture trait maps and the results of archaeological work”. Continuing, based on an earlier position, Afigbo (1984: 55) further stated that:

Our goal in reconstructing the history of the segmentary societies, no matter our source, should not be to write for them the same heroic genre of history as we write for the great states. It should be to write history which is as close an approximation to their own experience as is possible within the sources and technique available to us... We must ensure that the questions which we put to the oral traditions of any society are consistent with the intent and concern of the people's perception of their world.

The historian is now faced with an uneasy task; having become only an integral part in the process of reconstruction, waiting patiently for the students and scholars in the other disciplines to come up with their results. This is so because oral traditions would not give us the sort of solid 200, 500, or 1000 year coverage. It must be recalled that oral traditions are deficient in time and coverage/scope. The archaeologist comes to the rescue at this point. The problem, according to the archaeologist as far as the writing of the history of non-centralized societies is concerned, is that of chronology.

## **Archaeology**

Archaeology is concerned mostly with the material remains or fossilized results of human behaviors. Its methodologies are different from those applicable in historical reconstruction, which are based on written or oral traditions. Thus, according to V. E. Chikwendu (1984: 64):

For an archaeologist...oral tradition has a different value. This is a result of the methods of investigation adopted by archaeological science.... an archaeologist generally regards ... oral information as a working hypothesis. It is generally known that archaeologists do not accept as authentic things in non-archaeological circles as speculative and at best learned guesses.

In spite of preponderant ethno-botanic evidence to suggest the domestication of yams from the wilds in West Africa, archaeology is yet to unearth the remains of yams or evidences of its production. Thus, to better appreciate the relationship between oral traditions and archaeology, four main stages of archaeological investigations are considered. This will then constitute archaeological reconstruction and evidence.

### **Stages of Archaeological Investigations**

The archaeologist preoccupies himself with finding artifacts, which can be defined as things made and unmade by deliberate human actions. These are better in delineating the sequences of events in the past (J. Deetz, 1967: 3). Although archaeology has other goals to achieve, such as the supply of artifacts to museums, it helps build up chronologies and cultural sequences. This is because the artifacts are the direct evidences from which information about human social activities in the past, mostly, though not exactly, took place. These include parts of the human body, such as bones and hairs, architectural left over such as huts, caves and houses, large settlement structures such as city walls, outlines and plants. Included are also domestic refuse heaps, grave goods being presents or property made to or belonging to the dead, religious places and objects, fortifications, tools, weapons and ornaments. These artifacts are subject to destruction especially the organic ones like bones and sculptures made of wood. The inorganic ones, for instance charcoal, stay longer.

Archaeological methods include the reconnaissance and finding of the sites mentioned in oral traditions, and then excavating them, recording all the finds, analyzing the materials recovered in a systematic way, and then the writing of a report to interpret human occupation of the site that is under investigation (J. Deetz, 1967: 3). The archaeologists do not work in isolation but in conjunction with the natural sciences. This is simply because he cannot do the work alone. Afterall, archaeology, like oral traditions, has its own shortcomings. The analyses of artifacts, which include cleaning, sorting, labelling and recording, are essentially a laboratory process. The dating of the objects is the work of the relevant experts in physics. Plants and seed remains are sent to the chemists and botanists.

Faunal remains go to the zoologist, the soil scientist deals with soil samples, human remains go to the anatomist while computations are done by statisticians and with computers. The geologists deal with stone and rock analysis. It is only after bits of information might have been assembled from the other disciplines that any meaningful reconstruction (of course coupled with the specialist report) can be made.

The archaeologist has two methods of dating. These are relative and absolute dating. Relative dating is placing an assemblage in time relative to other assemblages. Here the archaeologists do not make assertions rather artifacts are sorted according to their placements in the various assemblage layers. For instance, if we have two layers of soil, 'A' and 'B' where 'B' is below 'A', we can infer that 'B' is older than 'A'. This could also be termed stratigraphy. There is a problem here because in the case of a likely historical accident, objects that were in 'B' could be found in 'A'; and could lead to drawing a wrong inference. The archaeologist, to be sure-footed in describing sequences of events; and state emphatically when events actually took place, must resort to absolute dating. However, it must be pointed out that absolute dating is not in itself absolute. Nonetheless, it has, to a larger extent, provided a solution to the establishment of chronologies. The invention of the Radio Carbon Dating Method by W. F. Libby in 1948 has greatly improved our reliance on absolute dating.

Archaeology has given credence to the study of non-centralized societies. Although archaeological reports do not always tally with oral traditions, archaeologists from the scratch rely heavily on oral tradition. This is because before the archaeologists embark on excavations oral interviews are conducted in order to ascertain a probable site. Although more archaeological works have been carried out or centred on centralized states, the excavations at Igbo Ukwu, Nsukka, Ugwuele, Ezzira, Afikpo and Umundu in the Eastern Nigeria hinterland and Ke, Okochiri and Ogolma in the Delta region, show the promises of archaeology in tackling the problems inherent in writing the history of non-centralized societies (N. Nzewunwa, 1980). Yet, it must be pointed out that there is still a lot to do. Nevertheless, only archaeology can effectively fill the gap created by oral traditions in terms of time coverage. This to the historian in modern times is invaluable, especially where documentation is poor or non-existent (B. A. Ogot, 1974: 67).

### **Biological Data**

Another non-narrative source is the biological data. This, for better discussion has been divided into two parts, namely, the whole part relationships and the fundamental biological process. We use the whole part relationship as data because many West Africans have been farmers and many crops are planted in different regions. During archaeological works, if pollen grains are recovered from clay they are usually taken to a trained botanist who will first detect the type of plant that has it; and then the region in which such a species of plant can grow. We can then infer that since this crop was grown in this type of vegetational region and that this was domesticated from a wild variety, hence the group of people who

lived there planted it. The ages of such plants have been determined by directly associating once-living materials bulky enough to provide sufficient carbon test. This also applies to animal bones (Thurstan Shaw, 1969: 5-10).

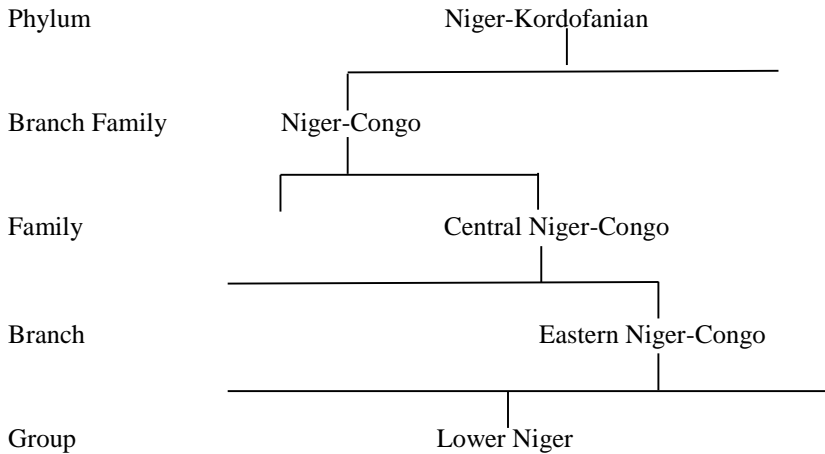
The fundamental aspect involves the use of natural selection and artificial selection to get biological data that can be used as a source for historical evidence. The historical relevance of this is that it enables us to make assertions about where a given species was originally domesticated. Thus, we can state that all domestication started from the wild, with human use of a wild species and followed by selection of superior mutations. Hence, where a species is an indigenous domesticate we shall expect to find the wild relatives. In as much as biological data seem to be an invaluable source; the debate by scholars on the origin, introduction and domestication of cultigens makes it unreliable, yet, for historical purposes (Robin Horton, 1982).

### **Linguistics**

Another source of historical evidence for writing the history of non-centralized societies, although not peculiar to them, is linguistics. Its relevance lies in the fact that it goes farther back into the remote past when compared with evidences from oral traditions. It is mostly studied because of how languages separated and diverged from each other thousands of years ago. Linguistic data has since helped us to determine common origins; time lapsed since separation, location of homelands and recent cultural interchanges. The most important method of interpreting linguistic data, especially in trying to establish common origins, is through the comparative method. Here, we use the knowledge of linguistic divergence derived from the study of a language whose history has been written as a means to an end. The end is to discover the historical significance of patterns of similarities and differences. This comparative method is based on a body of generalizations concerning the way in which language is affected by the splitting and dispersal into new geographically separated areas by its speakers, whereof occurs changes of vocabulary, especially in the non-basic vocabulary, pronunciation and changes in grammar. The language of the dispersed population first divides into dialects and after many years, say thousands, becomes two distinct languages. In this comparison, emphasis is laid on basic vocabulary because people tend to stick more to it than on non-basic vocabulary, which are but additions of new experiences (Horton, 1982).

In a comparison which attempted locating the homeland of the Lower Niger group of Communities of the Eastern Niger-Congo branch (See Table I), the principle of homeland location, which states that the area, which maintains the most distinctly related

**Table I: Language Classification of the Niger-Kordofanian Proto-Phylum**



Source: Bennett and Sterk, 1963: Language Classification, Ibadan Conference

languages, is likely to be the area of their homeland. It was inferred that the homeland of the Lower Niger group of communities would be around Ekpeye in the Rivers State as a result of the distinctness of the languages here (Horton, 1982). This inference was drawn from a comparison of agricultural products, food and its preparatory implements among the languages of the Lower Niger group. Also compared is yam production/cultivation among the Igbo (Abam), Ekpeye (Ahoada) and Ikwerre (Ogbakiri and Emohua). A proto-relationship between the languages and their speakers was established, implying that they originated from a common homeland (Kay Williamson, 1982).

**Table II: Agricultural Products and Food Preparatory Implements**

ENGLISH	IGBO (ABAM)	IKWERE (OGBAKIRI)	EKPEYE(AHOADA)
Yam	Ji	Iji	Iyi
Cocoyam	Ede/rikasi	Ede	Edenwuji
Banana	Une/ukom	Nnenne	Anyibo
Plantain	Une	Ekminima	Ideni
Okra	Okwuru	Okwuru	Uhulu
Oil	Manu	Mono	Mono
Pepper	Oso	Ise	Ese-bo
Fluted pumpkin	Ugu	Ognu	Uyi
Broad leaved pumpkin	Ugbogo	Mgbognumu	Okpokolo
Beans	Akidi	Akidi	Akidi
Grinder	Ngwe	Rugwuu	Iyeugwewere
Grind	Gwe	Gwu	Gwe
Grinding	Ogwigwe	ogwugwu	Ugwepia egwepia
To grind	Igwe	Ogwu	Ugwe
Pounding	Osusu	Ofufu	Usupia-usupia
Mortar	Isu	Worikne	Nweke
	Ikwo	Odo	Odo



From Table II, it is clear that there is a relative degree of firmness or coherence from the reconstructed culture words and, thus, has been able to infer an old culture element. The languages fit into one geographical environment and they tend to cluster towards the south around Ekpeye, which probably at their proto-stage understood each other. However, there have been changes in the sound systems of the languages due to innovations. In such innovations we see (kw) as in 'Okwuru' in both Igbo and Ikwerre having changed to (hu) in Ekpeye. However, these are still cognates but have contributed to changes in the phonology. Since the speakers of the three languages dispersed from a common homeland, they have simple words for most of the cultural words, which cannot be reduced further. Such words are for yam, cocoyam, banana, okra, oil, pepper, fluted pumpkin and beans. There are, however, compound words which still maintain their simple words, for instance we have ede in both Igbo and Ikwerre but -nwuji has been added to ede in Ekpeye. In the comparison, there are some borrowings which are being used together with the original culture words. For instance, in Igboland (Abam column), the second words for cocoyam and banana- nkasi, and ukom were borrowed from the Ibibio in pre-colonial times through warfare and trade.

**Table III:** Yam Production

ENGLISH	IGBO(ABAM)	IKWERRE(EMUOHA)
Yam	Ji	Iji
Mound	Okwu	Rukpohnu
Yam Seedling	Isiji	Risiji
(Yam) tendril	Omo(ji)	Ume(ji)
Stemming	Igba – omo	Ogbakwnu –ume
Barn	Oba	Ofa
Yellow Yam	Oku	Oko
God of Yam	Nfijioku	Ajoknuji
(Yam) harvesting	Igwu	Ogwugwu

#### Interview with Wichendu Akpe (Enuohua)

Table III, which dealt on Yam production again shows a common origin because only phonological and grammatical changes have occurred. One can, therefore, conclude that through linguistic comparison of culture words one can establish the homeland of different peoples with different languages, though the compared languages might seem as dialects to a foreigner. The fact is that sharing the same geographical environment has always meant sustained inter-group relations through trade and warfare. Proto-Lower Niger speakers were essentially agricultural, had the same mode of production and produced same crops before their separation from around Ekpeye in the distant past.

But this comparative method could be placed on the same level with relative dating in archaeology. The Linguists, therefore, sought for a method of absolute dating method. This dating method, **glottochronology**, devised by Morris Swadesh lays emphasis on the basic vocabulary of communities which are being dropped and replaced by other vocabulary at a constant rate. That is if we know what percentage of basic vocabulary two languages

share, we can estimate the time lapsed since separation. The basic vocabulary shared are said to be cognate. We can arrive at a percentage through which we can determine the number of years that have elapsed since separation. The lower the percentage, the higher the number of years that have elapsed and *vice versa*. The percentage is calculated with this formula:

$$\frac{\text{Cognates}}{\text{Cognates} + \text{non-Cognates}} \times \frac{100}{100}$$

Although Linguistic data goes far back into the remote-past than oral traditions they are nonetheless an invaluable source for historical reconstruction because the determination of the origin of a language is the determination of the origin of the people who speak it (Kay Williamson, 1982).

### **Ethnography**

Another non-narrative source of evidence is ethnography. By this we examine the social and cultural characteristics of a group in the present day and not necessarily concentrating on the past, as the archaeologist would do. Here, the first method, which has been called the law of cultural divergence, runs parallel with the linguistic comparative method. It is assumed that culture starts from a point and diverges at another, which points form the basis for historical reconstruction. The divergence might have arisen as a result of a historical accident. The two daughter cultures emanating as a result of the divergence from a common point will begin to experience different historical challenges. If the historian stumbles upon such cultures, he compares the similarities and peculiarities in the diverged daughter cultures. If the former outweighs the latter, we can infer that the cultures have just separated and *vice versa*. But the problem here would be to determine which of the two cultures are borrowed or genetic in order to enable the historian infer a common origin (Kay Williamson, 1982).

### **Before and After Method**

Another non-narrative source is the “Before and After Method” devised by Robin Horton (1982). As a law, it states that man being conservative in character changes with reluctance in terms of culture unless faced with new, and often traumatic, experience. If two societies ‘A’ and ‘B’ are of the same origin and with a similar culture, should one of them, for instance ‘A’ face a historical challenge ‘K’ (either trade or invasion), it becomes impinged by ‘K’. If the anthropologist or historian stumbles on them, ‘B’ will always tell how ‘A’ was before it was hit by ‘K’. Among the Kalabari, the Opuama were hit by the Atlantic slave trade while the Kalamas were not. Differences in political, social and economic institutions are a pointer to this fact.

Although there are problems in the disciplines employed in the interdisciplinary research approach, it is the only means of achieving a balance in the writing of the history of non-centralized societies; and even in the centralized ones.

## **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This study set out to discern the problems that could arise in attempting to write the history of the so-called stateless societies. It was, however, found out that despite these problems there existed continuities between non-centralized and centralized societies. They all had political, social and economic organs. It also argued that being situated on trade routes and participating concertedly in trade were not peculiar factors that accelerated centralization. Yet, commerce played an important part in the development of centralized societies. Those who were in charge of the social, political and economic organs in state societies were full-time specialists. Such full-time specialists were lacking in the non-centralized societies that even when situated on the trade routes could not develop into states. They were also associated with subsistence agriculture. This was unlike the centralized societies where they had departments of trade and agriculture overseen by their respective ministers and even produced more food.

As some of these states expanded, mostly commercially, they soon attracted traders from across the Sahara and Europe. Most of the merchants were Muslim scholars and theologians with sophisticated knowledge in commerce and politics, and were incorporated into the political mechanisms of the kingdoms as secretaries. They kept the day-to-day political and commercial activities' records; and even attempted writing the history of the kingdoms and, in fact, produced the biographies of the kings of the Western Sudanic empires. The Europeans also gravitated towards these kingdoms because of trade and helped increase the corpus of written materials about them. Since the non-centralized societies were not attractive enough for these scholars, and did not engage in expansive trading activities, they were only sketchily covered unlike the centralized kingdoms. Evenso, only the chronicles of the Muslim scholars on Western Sudanic empires go as far back as the 10th century AD, while the scanty Intelligence Reports on non-centralized societies by the colonial administrators only date to late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. Thus, this cannot give the needed historical coverage in reconstructing the histories of African communities.

The only source that came readily handy to the African historian was oral tradition, which was challenged by Western scholars and even by Africans trained in Western historiography, as a veritable source for historical writing. They demanded that the African historians should define their methodologies in a bid and validate oral tradition as a non-written source, pointing out the many limitations that are inherent in it. In defining his methodologies, the historian adopted basic steps, such as the systematic collection, documentation, transcription and interpretation of data. In the processes, handicaps were encountered and a resort to the interdisciplinary research approach was made. This research approach involved the use of archaeological methods which helped anchor a chronological base and sequence; the cultural comparative method of the anthropologists which studies and analyses cultural changes and traits; and linguistics to take care of the principles and

techniques of language classification with a view to determining origins, identifying homelands through comparative methods of culture words; and finally, lexicostatistics.

The interdisciplinary approach, thus, has been proven invaluable in writing the history of non-centralized societies. The historian though starting out boldly, could not have, as things were to prove, done it alone without drawing wrong inferences and coming out with suspicious works. To further the study of African societies, especially the non-centralized ones, African scholars have formed themselves into associations both at the national and international levels. These bodies set new techniques and directions in the writing of African history, insisting on a continental approach rather than resort to propaganda. Suggestions have been made regarding rewriting of the histories influenced by the colonial factor. Some of them have, at least, been revised. The Yoruba are neither descended from Egypt nor the Igbo Hebrews. Consequently, there are journals, such as the 'African,' 'Journal of African History,' 'Tarikh', 'Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana' and the 'Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria', to mention but a few, to further the writing of African history.

The 'Historical Society of Nigeria', to this end, has produced the *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. An index for measuring the status of African historiography has manifested itself in the projects undertaken by UNESCO, which led to the production of volumes of books on the 'Methodology of African History'. Although, the African Historian cannot claim authenticity of his product, he has provided, at least, a new insight into the past and, in fact, contributed to a better understanding of the present.

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