



## African Oral Genealogy: Collecting and Preserving Yesterday for Tomorrow

Osei-Agyemang Bonsu and Melvin P. Thatcher

Genealogical Society of Utah, Salt Lake City, USA

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| Meeting:                     | <b>108-1 Genealogy and Local History with Audiovisual and Multimedia</b> |
| Simultaneous Interpretation: | Yes  |

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 73RD IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL  
19-23 August 2007, Durban, South Africa  
<http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla73/index.htm>

### Abstract

*This paper reports recent work by the Genealogical Society of Utah to collect and preserve genealogical information from the oral traditions of ethnic groups in West Africa. Field officers were recruited and trained to identify ethnic groups in Ghana and Nigeria which have oral genealogy. Over 300 informants have been interviewed, recounting up to thirteen generations. A number of challenges had to be overcome in capturing and processing this information. The access that archives, libraries, museums, and research institutions provide to today's oral traditions will be the primary, perhaps only, source of information about ancestors for future generations.*

### Introduction

An African proverb says, "When an old man dies, it is as if a library is burnt down." This saying emphasizes the role oral tradition and oral history play in African cultures. There are societies in Africa where stories have been told for ages and passed down from generation to generation which if written could fill many volumes. This paper provides a brief overview of the oral genealogy program of the Genealogical Society of Utah (GSU) and reports its recent work to collect and preserve genealogical information from the oral traditions of ethnic groups in West Africa.

### Genealogical Society of Utah

The GSU, also known as FamilySearch Archive, is a private, nonprofit, cultural and educational organization founded in 1894 by the leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ

of Latter-Day Saints. It was formed to promote genealogical research and to help members of the church to identify their ancestors by collecting, organizing, preserving, and providing access to sources of genealogical information. However, its holdings, databases, research facilities, and website are open to all people regardless of religion.

## **Oral Genealogy**

In addition to gathering and preserving written records through microfilming and digital imaging, the GSU collects oral genealogy traditions. By “oral genealogy tradition” we mean genealogy information that has been passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.<sup>1</sup> We began collecting oral genealogies in the Pacific Island countries of Tonga, Samoa, and Tahiti in the 1970's. Collection work was expanded to the Southeast Asian countries of Indonesia and Malaysia in the 1980s. And we are now collecting oral genealogies in West Africa.

## **Ecology of oral genealogy**

We seek to identify ethnic groups which have oral genealogy traditions. The best prospects for finding an oral genealogy tradition are in societies where genealogical relationships provide the fabric for the daily social, economic, political and/or religious life. The late, famous, Iban ethnographer Benedict Sandin sums up the functional roles of genealogy in his society as follows:

In Iban society tusut [genealogies] are essential to the solution of many questions, from determining whether a marriage is incestuous to settling a fruit tree dispute. The parents of a marriageable daughter may be able to claim a higher bride price if they can document the existence of famous forbearers – pioneers, war leaders or politicians. A host will not be certain of how to treat his guest until he is aware of kin relationship, or lack thereof.<sup>2</sup>

The GSU conducts pilot projects to ascertain the existence of an oral genealogy tradition in a particular ethnic group.

## **Types of interviews**

In our oral genealogy activities, we have encountered four types of interview situations. Our aim is to conduct interviews where the informant speaks from memory alone or recites with the aid of a memory device. The former type of interview is most common, although it may be done with the help of others who are present. Memory devices include songs (some genealogies are sung), rough notes, and visible objects such as a notched stick, knotted rope, or water buffalo horns (one for each generation), stools, graves, etc.<sup>3</sup> If a potential informant has a written genealogy, rather than having it read verbatim, we would ask permission to make a copy of it. When informants are able to

---

<sup>1</sup> This definition follows the distinction that is made between “oral tradition” and “oral history” in Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 27-28.

<sup>2</sup> Typescript by Benedict Sandin in the possession of the Genealogical Society of Utah.

<sup>3</sup> See Vansina 44-47 for a detailed discussion of memory devices.

only talk about progenitors and relatives whom they have personally known, they are sharing oral family history not an oral genealogy tradition.

## **Tools and instruments**

Oral genealogy projects require a variety of tools and instruments. An audio recorder is used to record the interview when the informant agrees to the recording. A digital camera is needed to photograph the informant for the record and for cross-checking the work of field officers. Field forms, of which more shall be said, are completed in the village at the time of the interview. A spreadsheet, computer, a software utility to convert the data to a GEDCOM file format, and genealogy software are used for processing and automating the data collected in the village.

## **Audio Recorders**

A brief comment on audio recorders—over the years, we have tried cassette tape recorders, mini-disk recorders, and digital recorders. In the field, equipment failure must be avoided, while file size and download times are critical processing issues, particularly when interviews may last up to three hours. So we have settled on the solid state digital recorder for durability, flexibility in file formats (\*.wav or \*.mp3),<sup>4</sup> and fast data transfer via USB or fire wire connections.

## **Field Method**

Field work is carried out by members of the target ethnic group who know the language and customs of the people. They may be recruited from educational institutions, government service, or the general community.

A decision has to be made early about what to collect. In the villages pedigrees are remembered for various purposes, not all of which are to recount biological and/or adoptive relationships. So one has to be clear about the various types of pedigrees [biological, succession, scholarly, etc.] and decide which one(s) to collect. One must also decide whether to work by lineage or by village. A lineage focus means working through all informant referrals, including moving from village to village as needed, before switching to another lineage. We prefer to interview all informants in a village, regardless of lineage affiliation, before moving to another village because it is the most cost-effective method.

Local protocol must be followed by contacting government officers and traditional leaders. The latter can provide the names of lineages and their leaders in the village. The lineage heads identify the primary informants. Primary informants may also be found by talking to various lineage members. A primary informant may refer the field worker to a secondary informant who can provide additional information.

---

<sup>4</sup> We have decided that a minimum sampling frequency of 44.1 mhz and recording mode of MP3 224 kbps are sufficient to capture the full range of the spoken word in an oral genealogy interview.

## **Interview Method**

Where to start is determined by the way the oral genealogy tradition is remembered. For example, Ashanti informants in Ghana give more information about ancestors by starting with the village history because the latter is intertwined with their genealogy. Most interviews, however, begin with the first (or most remote) ancestor. In the Pacific Islands informants begin with themselves.

In the first interview, open ended questions are posed, and the informant is permitted to talk without interruption by the interviewer. A second or third interview is conducted to ask specific question that stem from the first interview for clarification and additional information. At the time of the interviews informants are informed of the intended uses of their genealogical data and that they will be made public.

## **Field Forms**

Pedigree information is extracted from the oral interview and written down on an oral pedigree form for review by the informant. Because event dates are almost never known, the informant is asked to indicate whether named individuals are dead or alive. This is done as part of second and third interviews.

Information about the informant and his or her relationship to the pedigree are recorded on an oral pedigree identification form; this is done to tie the pedigree down in time and space. Our concern when collecting oral genealogy data is to ensure that the information recorded is consistent with what the informant gave, so the informant is also asked to confirm the accuracy of the written pedigree by signing a declaration at the bottom of the form.

The informant gives his or her permission for the GSU to use the contents of the interview by signing a release form.

## **Data Processing**

Information for the field form is typed into a spreadsheet where a unique identification number is added for each person. This number is used by genealogy software to keep relationships straight. The spreadsheet data are saved as a text file. The text file is converted to the GEDCOM format that is required by genealogy software. This enables the output of all of the reports that can be output from the genealogy software. A descendants chart is printed out and presented to the informant in appreciation for the interviews.

## **African Oral Genealogy**

Oral genealogy is kept in Africa for a variety of economic, social and political reasons. For example, an important socio-economic function of genealogy is the management of inheritance. A family may have a property like land, golden ornaments or precious

beads which have been passed on from one generation or the other. To prevent any family disputes, the head of the family needs to know at any point in time to whom that the property should go to when the present custodian dies.

Maintenance of lineage, family, and personal prestige is one of the socio-political reasons for remembering genealogy. The genealogies of the Wolof of Senegal, for example, perform an important function in a society in which rank and caste of individuals are based on birth and family. Because a person's moral nature is believed to be genetically determined, genealogies are recited during marriage negotiations to show the suitability of the family backgrounds of the prospective bride and groom.<sup>5</sup>

Genealogy supports naming practices. Among the Ashanti, people are named after family members who lived or are living a good life because it is believed that the life of the person one is named after has great influence on one's own life. People also take pride in the type of name they have (for example Serwaa, Agyemang, Prempe, etc.). One must be able to prove genealogically, when challenged, how he or she got the name. Failure to do this can result in sanctions including changing of the name.

Genealogical information plays a critical role in the succession to a throne (or even the head of the lineage ["Abusuapanin" as it called among the Ashanti people]). In Africa selecting the wrong person for a throne can lead to civil war in a community or a tribe. So the kingmakers need to know their genealogy very well to ensure that right people are selected at the right time.

## **West African Projects**

The GSU's first oral genealogy project in West Africa was conducted in Gambia in the early 1980's. After a hiatus of about two decades, a pilot project was organized in 2003 among the Ashanti of Ghana. In 2004 and 2005 pilot projects were carried out among the Ga in Ghana and the Ibibio in Nigeria. The remainder of this presentation is focused on the projects in Ghana and Nigeria.

## **Ghana: The Ashanti People**

The Ashanti people of the Akan, from which nearly half of the Ghanaian population is descended, comprise the largest tribe in Ghana and are one of the few matrilineal societies in West Africa. The matriclan system of the Akan continues to be economically and politically important. Each lineage controls the land farmed by its members, functions as a religious unit in the veneration of its ancestors, supervises marriages, and settles internal disputes among its members. Ashanti kings have retained their status as traditional rulers until today. Their celebrated status lives on in the tradition of the Golden Stool. The Akan tribes speak various dialects of Twi, a language rich in proverbs. Euphemisms are also very common, especially concerning events connected

---

<sup>5</sup> Judith T. Irvine, "When is genealogy history? Wolof genealogies in comparative perspective," *American Ethnologist* 5.4 (November 1978): 653-54.

with death. The Ashanti village is the basic social and economic unit, and the entire village typically participates in major ceremonies.

### **Ghana: Ga-Adangbe People**

The Ga-Adangbe people inhabit the Accra Plains. The Ga groups occupy the western portions of the Accra coastlands, while the Adangbe inhabit the eastern plain. These ethnic groups have a patrilineal descent system. Both languages are derived from a common root language, but modern Ga and Adangbe languages are no longer similar. Although they originally inhabited fishing villages, today more than seventy-five percent of the Ga live in urban centers. Yet the presence of major industrial, commercial, and governmental institutions in the city, as well as increasing migration of other people into the area, have not prevented the Ga people from maintaining certain aspects of their traditional culture.

### **Nigeria: The Ibibio People**

The Ibibio people are a tribe in southeast Nigeria who have a patrilineal descent system. "Ibibio" refers to those who speak the Ibibio language. They are closely related to the Annang and the Efik people and were traditionally located in the same state as these two groups, namely Cross River State. Recently though, the state was partitioned to form the states of Akwa-Ibom and Cross River. The population of Akwa-Ibom State is comprised of the Annang and the Ibibio tribes.

## **Results**

Over three hundred informants were interviewed for the period from 2004 – 2006. Informants recounted up to thirteen generations. Some told stories about migration and the founding of villages. Wars and disasters were sometimes noted. Succession of stools and lands were also noted. Length of interview varied from thirty minutes to three hours. On average fifty names were provided for one hour of interview, depending on the knowledge of informant. Average age of informants was 65.5 years. Over fifty-five percent of informants were illiterates without any formal education. More than ninety percent of the people interviewed were farmers who live in villages and small towns.

## **Field work**

Interviews were scheduled for the morning or evening, but very often during the evening after the people had returned from their farms and are taking a rest. In most African countries, "libation" must to be poured before elders will talk about their departed ones. This is done by inviting all departed ancestors to come and partake in a drink or cola nuts. Informants, therefore, often ask for drinks or cola nuts before providing information. Cash is accepted for the ritual if drinks and cola nuts are not immediately available.

Even though there is a primary informant, other people are always around who contribute any time they find that the informant is mixing things up. These interruptions are very welcome as they help to validate the information being provided.

Four types of interviews were tried to find out which could provide the best results.

1. Allowing the interviewee to talk as long as he can after the topic had been introduced, with very little or no interruption by the interviewer.
2. Asking open ended questions and allowing the interviewee to take as much time as he can to answer each question.
3. Using closed ended questions, for example, "What is the name of your great great grandfather?" "Who was his wife?" "Who were their children?" Etc.
4. Using open ended questions and closed ended questions.

We found out that the first method is very good for obtaining stories of how individual settlements came about, on wars, and other events. But the informant often tells long stories which are not directly related to the information required. Stories frequently center on heroes and leaders of groups.<sup>6</sup> On average, informants responding in this way provide about five names for a thirty minute interview. The names mentioned are often disconnected, so it is very difficult to link them up as families. However, this type of interview forms the basis for a follow-up interview where specific questions are framed to obtain more detailed genealogical information.

The second method keeps the informant focused, but like the first method, informants talk about events which are not always directly related to the information required. Genealogical details are sometimes missed as the focus is on heroes and group leaders. Details of a particular event are, however, obtained as a result of this method of interviewing.

Among the Ashanti, there is one thread that seems common to the majority of the migration stories told, namely that most of the Ashanti people came out of a hole or a cave. It is said that when the Ashanti were fighting in a district in Ghana called Bono, there came a time when they all knew they have been conquered. All of a sudden, thousands of them started coming out from a hole to fight. The more they were killed, the more they came, and finally their enemies were conquered. According to the informant that is why the Ashanti got the name "Asante Kotoko, wok um apem a apem beba" which when literally translated means "The Great Asante people, if you kill a thousand, a thousand will come." The Ashanti are still known by this saying.

Listening to the informant, one will be tempted to say, "What an incredible story!" But what quickly came to my mind as I listened to this man was that, there might have been a cave nearby where the people had taken refuge until the war began. So as the war raged, some people saw those in the cave coming out and thought that was a miracle. After the war, some of these eyewitnesses might have gone to their villages and

---

<sup>6</sup> For the function of "heavy figures" as a memorable way of organizing information, see Walter J. Ong, *Orality & Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1999), 69-71.

narrated what they saw and this might have been passed on from one generation to our time.

Details about how some festivals started were also told by informants. One story tells how the Ga came celebrate an annual festival to hoot against hunger. It is said that the first Ga ancestors went through a long drought when they first came to Ga Land, which nearly resulted in the death of all the people. One of the fetish priests is said to have gone to the next world and called the rains to come. Upon his return, the rains started, and there was a lot of food which saved the Ga people. From that time the event had been celebrated as a festival.

No matter how incredible these stories may seem, there is some truth in them, and they need to be heard and preserved for tomorrow to judge.

The third method of interviewing provides names that are linked into families and generations. It produces few or no names that are disconnected. However, the very interesting stories are left untold.

We determined that the best way to gather the genealogy tradition is to use all three methods for each interview. However, this is time consuming, and often leads to informant fatigue. Therefore, informants are typically interviewed on two occasions. Method one is used during the first interview. Based on the first interview, specific questions are framed to obtain specific answers. The second interview links up all names mentioned during the first interview and draws out more names and relationships. It also helps validate information previously provided.

It is often very difficult to write everything said by an informant. The digital recording is used to recover and fill in missed information.

After the pedigree form has been certified to be as the informant gave it, an ID form and a release form are completed, and the informant signs both forms. This finishes data collection in the field.

When the data are automated, a descendant chart is produced using genealogy software. A copy of the chart is sent to the informant. The chart is reviewed with the informant to ensure that it is consistent with the information given. Informants are excited to receive copies of their records and make copies for all their family members who live away from the place where they reside.

## **Access for family history research**

Written versions of oral genealogies collected by the GSU may be accessed through the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, any of more than 4,000 family history centers around the world, and interlibrary loans to affiliated libraries.

In the future we hope to make the recordings, photos, and electronic data available to registered users for research via our free website [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org).

## **Conclusion**

Due to rural poverty, there has been a rural urban drift over the past thirty or so years in most African countries. The practice whereby the elderly sit down with the youth during the evening in the rural areas to tell them about the past is therefore becoming a thing of the past. The youth are becoming less interested to know their past, where they came from, who their ancestors were, and the rich stories of the past as they face the realities of today's modern world. There is an Akan proverb which says "if the old man loses his muscles, it goes into that of the young man." This is interpreted to mean that as the old man loses his memory that of the young man gets richer, believing that information had been passed on. This proverb is gradually becoming invalid due to rural urban migration. It is therefore very important to actively find a way of obtaining the rich information the elderly have and preserve it for the benefit of tomorrow's children.

What makes the collection of oral genealogy in Africa so important is that in most cases, there is no other source where the information provided can be accessed. Therefore, even though there may be some difficulties in validating the information, the importance of collecting and preserving such information cannot be overemphasized. The end of colonial rule, changes of government, and the HIV pandemic have increased awareness among archives, libraries, museums, and research institutions of the importance of collecting and preserving oral history and genealogy. These institutions need to share expertise and find ways of working together to hasten collection and preservation of oral genealogy while knowledgeable informants are still available. The access that they provide to today's oral traditions will be the primary, perhaps only, source of information about ancestors for future generations. Libraries, archives, and museums in Africa can play a leading role in collecting and preserving oral genealogy and family history traditions through community outreach programs. The GSU is ready to assist them through training, consultation, and cooperative projects.