

ORAL TRADITION AS SOURCE OF SUSTENANCE OF TRADITIONAL VALUES: A STUDY OF THE LEGENDARY MBAERI NWAOTUOKE, FOUNDER OF THE PEOPLE OF MBIERI OF IMO STATE

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Abstract

Oral tradition is information, memories and knowledge held in common by a group of people, over many generations that are used in the reconstruction of history. In a general sense, it refers to the recall and transmission of a specific, preserved textual and cultural knowledge through vocal utterance. Oral tradition is the root from which traditional values must draw sustenance. This paper provides an insight into the historical origin of the Mbieri people. The history of the Mbieri has a foundation legend, known as the Mbaeri Nwaotuoque. This paper emphasizes the importance of oral tradition as a source of sustenance of traditional values in African history. The study posits that oral tradition has performed the same function as written history and non can be elevated above the other. Given that the oral transmission of information of a people from generation to generation could be prone to distortion and/or loss of valuable facts, this paper argued that oral tradition has continued to serve the useful purpose of creating awareness and deepening the people's knowledge about themselves, their traditional societies and the events that happened in the past.

KEYWORDS: Oral tradition, Culture, History, Traditional values

Introduction

Oral tradition epitomizes a reliable source of data collection in societies where written documents are not kept. It keeps alive people's culture through generations by orally narrating the memorized stories of their history, beliefs, values and practice. Bagchi(2008)posits that the spread of knowledge of people's way of life and thought bound them together and strengthened their cohesion. As it is, it is an aspect of human society's evolution; a complex process of generating information that sustains the life of a given society. In this, words are used to form mental pictures that are associated with ideas, events or things. There is no doubt that culture is a people's cumulative knowledge and experiences, the set of beliefs explaining the existence of and giving meaning to the universe and the moral code governing the conduct of social affairs, (Bagchi, 2008). Oral tradition constitutes a set of values that sustains the existential qualities of a society.

The non-existence of dates in oral tradition does not make this source unreliable, and therefore do not necessarily invalidate African historiography as a scientific discipline (Ajayi 1979; Alagoa 1966). Jan Vansina (1961) re-affirmed that

'oral traditions are legitimate and valuable sources for the historian...They are indispensable if we hope to arrive at a genuine understanding of what happened in Africa.' In the above context, Vansina acknowledges the invaluable benefit of oral tradition. He claimed that it is legitimate and useful in understanding the various movements (historical events) in the past. He, therefore, encouraged historians to use this medium.

Fadeiye (2010:25) while acknowledging the words of Ajayi and Alagoa posit that:

African non- literate societies themselves have always used the oral mode of transmission of general knowledge, history and customs without any feelings of inadequacy. Many had evolved various devices for the faithful transmission of those ancient traditions essential to maintaining the identity and integrity of the communities.

The above excerpt justifies the validity of oral tradition and it is acknowledged widely in Igboland that several institutions and symbols have been used as relics to represent these events. Oral traditions have been proved to be adequate in re-constructing histories, cultures and general knowledge of societies. Moreover, that Africans were not literate in the western-type of education before the advent of Europe cannot cast the African system of education into dust bins. It was evident that Africans had an informal educational system which was adequately manned by elders, and the learning environment was typified by the serene and beautiful evening after the day's farming activities and this took place at the centre of the compound in front of the Obi. The moonlight afforded the participants the opportunity to enjoy an atmosphere of intellectual acquisition. Some of these learning processes were presented through moonlight stories and the use of proverbs to inculcate wisdom (Akonuche) into the learners. It therefore, follows that lots of traditional values are imbibed in the future generation through this process.

Oral traditions have been conceptualized as a valuable instrument in stimulating and promoting African cultural heritage. Volumes of testimonies justify this. Samuel Johnson (1921) reconstructed the *History of the Yoruba* by using oral tradition; Jacob Egharevba (1968) did use it in reconstructing *The Short History of Benin*; Afanda (1973) confirmed that in the past, some parts of Yoruba land, Ekiti, Owo, and Ondo were under Benin kingdom, using oral tradition.

Ade Ajayi (1964) has used oral tradition to correct the place and role of Alimi in the History of Oyo Empire. In any case, Alimi had no official connection with the Fulbe Jihad. He did not arrive until the early 1820s and the Jihad had begun long since 1804. He also lacked an official appointment to act as a flag bearer.

This excerpt has debunked the assertion connecting *Alimi* with the fall of the Oyo Empire. This is the utilitarian value of oral tradition which had corrected the erroneous mistake found in some written sources. By and large, this exposed one of the shortcomings of written sources of history which did not involve appropriate conduct of research and the only option was to misrepresent the actual events surrounding the historical movement.

Oral tradition by every standard is proven, and the validity of its records has linked several generations by keeping sacred, data that would have been lost. Although its application is open to infiltrations of sentiments, but eminent scholars like Jan Vansina (1961), Alogoa (1966) and others have shown to a large extent the reliability of this source and also emphasized that facial look and the demonstration of the interviewee creates imageries that help to sustain the record and the events built into all cultures.

Conceptual Framework

Oral tradition has been certified as a veritable medium for the reconstruction of histories of Africa, Asia, and Southern American societies. These societies were able to maximize the usefulness of Oral tradition to regenerate their lost past. Therefore, there is no doubt that Oral tradition is a complex process but fundamental in generating information about the culture of people from generation to generation. In this, words are used to form mental pictures and this ultimately helps to sustain the traditional values of the people. Language in this context becomes the repository of ideas and as long as a language survives the challenges of social change, the culture of the society survives and a process of mutation enhances the growth of the people as applicable to the people of Mbieri.

Culture and tradition have an interactive relation. Culture represents a critical aspect of the past as well as the future; whereas, *tradition* directs to the process of transmission, delivery, and maintenance of values, properties, customs and principles, marks the cultural identity of individuals, groups, nations and mankind. Petkrović (2007) conceptualizes tradition as an important and powerful centre of crystallization of social experience. He further argued that tradition is fundamental in understanding the present and the vision of a future. This position presupposes that some institutions and personalities duly represent these fundamentals and ensure a constant transmission of the vision of society. This vision constitutes written or unwritten body of social values that are sacred to the sustenance of the future. A society without a future represents a dying society, and this is a society without prescribed traditional values. Bozilovic (2004:451) justifies the same position as he corroborates that the germ of the new can often be found in the most courageous forebodings and predictions from the past, and the value of the past is presented in the possibility of its projection into the future.

In this approach, tradition is repeatedly reconstructed through interpretations and selection process. This is significant because it helps to keep and also modify and repeatedly form the society's tradition in the process of inter-generation transmission.

Arguably, the essential thing here is that there is a preservation of a positive cultural heritage which constructs a people's cultural identity. Therefore, traditional values encompass those beliefs, moral codes, and mores that are passed down from generation to generation within a culture, sub-culture or community (Petkrovic, 2007). Oral tradition is classified into myths, legends, and folktales and in this study, the focus shall be on legend and the legendary Mbaeri Nwaotuoke in Mbieri, Imo State.

A legend is a kind of oral tradition which is significantly historical. It is the historical medium of record-keeping by ancestors which records past events in a society. It could be about an individual or a place. In more specific terms, it denotes the deeds of human beings in their relationship with their environment. Sometimes, it depicts some scientific attributes like the legendary Amadioha whose history bestrides the entire Igbo land.

In this paper, tradition has been used to dramatize the emergence of Mbieri people and the process of internal migration that lay the foundation of Mbieri and its culture. Therefore, the legendary Mbaeri Nwaotuoke synthesizes the appropriateness of Mbieri history. This shall bring to the fore, the incidents that validate the name Mbieri and its hero.

Oral Tradition and the Historical Mbaeri Nwaotuoke

Before the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the 18th century which led to the invention of the printing machine among other things, the traditional societies of the world depended mainly on oral transmission of their history and storage of their traditions from one generation to another. Societies that had no chroniclers in the king's court and particularly, the Igbo societies that did not see anything germane in surrendering their autonomy to a single authority had community historians and these were men endowed with a great degree of wisdom and tact. Some appear to be village musicians and native doctors or priests who always communed with the gods. These classes of beings were revered and they symbolized continuity and remained reliable in carrying out their responsibilities. They have been able to ensure accurate transmission of the events of the past, significantly, the origin of societies.

Mbieri is one of the nine (9) towns that make up the present Mbaitoli Local Government Area of Imo State, Nigeria. It is the largest and the most populous of the nine towns with a population of about 125,000 people (Mba, 2001:23). The oral tradition of Mbieri traces its origin to its legendary father, Mbaerilam Nwaotuoke. But there has continued to be controversy over where this legendary founder of Mbieri came from. There are three contending views on the history of Nwaotuoke, the father of

Mbaerilam which Anukam (2009) summarized. One of such views traced the history of the origin of Nwaotuoke to Awka where he was said to have migrated to Isu around Orlu area and from there, he arrived at the present Oriembieri Market Square and settled permanently there.

Another version had it that he originated from Arochukwu in the present day Abia State from where he migrated and settled among his kinsmen at Orji Uratta in the present day Owerri North L.G.A. of Imo State, and from there he moved down to a nearby virgin forest (now Oriembieri) because of oppression and disagreement that ensued between them. A third version said that Nwaotuoke was a core Igbo-stock migrated into this present Igboland, and that he settled at Oriembieri as others were also settling in other convenient places for them in the South East. (Anukam, 2009:12).

The name "Mbieri" is believed by the people to be the corruption of the original name "Mbaeri" abridged from "Mbaerilam", which may have been done erroneously probably by the colonial authorities who found it difficult to get the word correctly and decided to pronounce and write it in their best possible way. Chukwudire (2010:36) believes that the name Mbaeri or Mbaerilam is a prayer or wish that "I may not perish in a distant land", which suggests that the bearer of the name or may be his father prayed not to perish in a distant land; that is, the new land he found himself in.

Oral tradition has it that *Nwaotuoke* had a son whom he named *Mbaerilam* (*Mbaeri*), which literally translated to '**may I not perish or be devoured in a foreign or distant land**'. *Mbaeri* later metamorphosed into *Mbieri*. *Mbaerilam*, the son of *Nwaotuoke* later got married and begot five (5) sons, who in turn got married themselves and begot twenty-eight (28) other sons, which constituted the original 28 villages or *umunna* groups of Mbieri land and each of the leaders of the various *umunna* groups or villages had respect for their sacred *ofo* which symbolised power, authority and influence. These twenty-eight villages from the twenty-eight sons of *Mbaeri* and their respective *ofo* represented the origin of "*Mbieriogu-ofo-na-ofo-asato*", which is a corporate identity slogan of Mbieri people.

Another Mbieri scholar, Awujo (1974) in his work argues that *Nwaotuoke*, the ancestral father of Mbieri had migrated from Isuama in the present day Orlu area of Imo State. The date of the said migration is not known. He also believes that *Nwaotuoke* had an only son called *Mbaerilam* and that both father and son migrated from Isuama and settled down at Oriembieri which is now the central square for all the communities in Mbieri town. He also believes that it was *Mbaerilam*, the only son of *Nwaotuoke* that gave birth to the original twenty-eight (28) villages that made up Mbieri community at its inception (Awujo, 1974). The initial twenty-eight (28) villages that made up Mbieri land at its inception have dwindled to eighteen (18) villages now; one of them is now extinct, while nine others had merged with some other villages. The existing eighteen (18) villages now in Mbieri are as follows: Achi, Amankuta, Amaulu,

Awo, Obazu, Obokwe, Ohohia, Ebom, Eziome, Ubakuru, Umuagwu, Umuahii, Umudagu, Umuduru, Umunjam, Umuonyeali, Umuobom and Umuomumu.

Mbaeri, the son of Nwaotuoque is believed to have married five (5) wives who begot six male children for him as follows: Nwarusim, Amaike, Nwaeze, Nwaoha, Ezi and Ihitte. It was through the five wives that the existing names of five groups in Mbieri – *ImeNneIse* came about and they are as follows: Amaike, Umunwaeze, Umunwaoha, Ezi and Ihitte. The names of these sons are now used to identify each of the groups. Mbieri community till today still shares any booty into five places, according to their mothers or “*ime-nne*”. It is the tradition of Mbieri (in a polygamous family) to share a late father's property among his sons based on the number of wives he had. The above five maternal clusters (*IME NNE ISE*) of Mbieri were constituted as follows:-

AMAIKE GROUP was made up of the following villages: Umuarusim, Umuagwuru, Obokwe, Umuahii, Okwoba and Umuduru. Over time, Okwoba was absorbed into Umuahii and it became a kindred in Umuahii village and no longer one of the villages that make up Amaike group. Umuagwu (Umuagwuru) which is now one of the villages that make up Amaike Group is believed by the people to be an immigrant group and not one of the sons of Mbaeri. But her inclusion as one of the villages that make up the present day Amaike group is because Umuagwu which had immigrated into Mbieri had absorbed Umuarusi, the original village and Umuarusi has now integrated into Umuagwu as a kindred there and no longer a village.

UMUNWAEZE GROUP was made up of the following villages: Ubakuru, Amankuta, Obuzi, Umuomumu, and Umuobom. Obuzi, which was one of the initial villages in Umunwaeze group was absorbed by Amankuta, making Obuzi now be a kindred in Amankuta village.

UMUNWOHA GROUP was composed of the following villages: Awo, Ohohia, Ebom, Oboro. Oboro is now in extinction. Oral tradition has it that most of the descendants of Oboro had migrated up north to Oboro-UmuezeOgwa as a result of insufficient land space for expansion and farming.

EZI GROUP is made up of the following villages: Eziome, Achi, Obazu, Amaogwugwu, Obilubi and Umuneke. It is believed that the original sons of Mbaeri in this Group were Eziome, Achi and Umuneke villages. Amaogwugwu, Obilubi and Obazu were said to have migrated into the area from AmaruruIho in the present day Ikeduru L.G.A. of Imo State, in about 1850.

IHITE GROUP is composed of Amaulu, Umuonyeali, Umudagu and Umunjam. (Chukwudire, 2010:83-89).

NwaotuoqueMbierilam enjoined his Mbieri people to be hard-working and his people cherished high moral standard while bad behaviour is condemned in its entirety. Strict sanctions were placed on those who engaged in evil/wrong behaviour to serve as deterrent to others. This was his concept of maintaining peace and stability in Mbieri land. Moreover, he enjoined his people to imbibe the culture believing in the

true God, but the difference with contemporary religions lies in the approach to the supreme God. Therefore, the people of Mbieri believed in the Supreme God (*Chi Ukwu*) and other gods (deities) through which they reached this Supreme God. Among these gods or deities are Agwunshi, Amadioha (the son of Ala, god of thunder), OduMbieri (OduOrie deity), Ezeala (Ala deity), OduEzeElu (KamaluOzuzu), IyiAfo (god of Okitankwo stream), etc. The most notable or chief of all these gods in Mbieri is OduMbieri, said to be a peace-loving and self-contented god, not interested in tasking the people with expensive sacrifices. It expects three things from the people of Mbieri as follows: Any man that becomes an *Nze naOzo* must take a cow and do outing ceremony of going round OrieMbieri (*igbahoahia*), amidst jubilation, feasting, merry making, etc.; Any young girl in Mbieri that reached the puberty age should take part in the *IriNta* Festival, which was like fattening ceremony (*Mgbede*). It was a developmental task of female adolescents growing into maturity and adulthood. It was where young girls were taught mother-craft, how to handle babies, their husbands and how to run their homes generally. Lucky and beautiful girls, including the families they came from often took part only once in the *Nta* festival and got married. It was the unlucky ones that could participate in the *Nta* festival up to two or three times – *IribiNta*. It was a show of wealth of their families with food items – dried lumps of meat and fish, etc., that your family could boast of.

The *OduMbierideity* expected all the married women in Mbieri to do outing ceremony (child dedication), usually after two or three months after delivery at OrieMbieri, carrying the baby and the *Oba Nzu*. She would smear her body and that of the baby with *nzu* (white chalk or calcium carbonate) moving from one shade to the other, showing the baby and attracting compliments from the people both in cash and kind, in the tradition of “*Omugwo*” ceremony in Igbo culture, just as we do today in churching ceremony. *Nzu* traditionally is a sign of peace. In Igbo land, it is used as a mark of purity of mind or kind gesture shown to a visitor. It represents the present day powder. (Chukwudire., 2013:83-89).

The Concept of *Ofo* and how it has Sustained the Traditional Values of Mbieri People

NwaotukeMbaerilam introduced the symbolic *ofoin* Mbieri land which was and is still upheld in Igboland and initiated the popular slogan of *Mbieri-ogu-ofor-na-ofo-asato*. He made it mandatory on his successors to say it. And it originated from the fact that each of the leaders of the initial twenty-eight (28) villages or Umunna groups that made up Mbieri land at its inception had their respective sacred *ofo* as a symbol of their power, authority and influence. In Mbieri traditional society, (and Igboland in general), the *ofo* being a special short wooden stick, is a visible symbol of authority for any man in any specific position of authority given to its holder to administer justice to the

people. The people accord so much reverence to it because of its socio-cultural significance. In some cases the *ofò* is deified with sacrifices offered to it occasionally.

The *ofò* has significantly helped in sustaining the traditional values of Mbieri traditional society. It is used in taking decisions and enforcing such decisions on the whole villages on matters affecting the community as a whole and by different *ofò* holders (*Oji ofos*) of the various villages that make up the entity to maintain the societal norms and ensure peaceful co-existence. Chukwudire (2010:127) cited in Onyeonu (2013:31-32) posits that:

To take decisions in matters affecting the whole town and enforce such decisions on all the villages, all the Nze, Ndi-Isi-agbara (juju priests) and the Oji-ofos of all the villages would assemble in either AfoNnudo, Ori-Mbieri or Ama-uku to discuss the matter at hand and if a decision was reached, they would go before the Odu-orie shrine at Ori-Mbieri and before Nnudo shrine at AfoNnudo to enforce the decision by hitting their ofos on the ground (ikuofo) and cursing anybody that would contravene the decision they have taken (igo-fo). After doing this, the decision taken became a law and no village dared to break it.

Onyeonu (2013:34) corroborates the above thus:

The use of the ofò was of tremendous importance to the OhaMbieri traditional institution. Judgments or decisions reached by the assembly were normally sealed up by the application of the ofò (igofo). The use of the ofò in resolving conflicts in the traditional Mbieri society made it binding on all nze members of the assembly to stand by the truth. If for any reason, it is feared that any of the nze members had been influenced in any way, either by bribing him, giving him gifts or as a result of family affinity over the conflict issue, they usually applied the ofò which made it mandatory for the nze men to tell the truth, despite any form of influence.

There is a saying that he who must come to equity must come with clean hands, likewise, the *ofò* holders who are given the authority and right to dispense justice to the people are expected to do so with justice. That is why it is said in Igbo that "*onyejiofo, yajidekwaogu*" (he who has right should have justification for his right).

NwaotuokeMbaerilam also introduced the Ayamgba Festival:

This festival is believed by Mbieri people to be the first major assignment that Mbaeri gave to his first son, Ubakuru, to call together all his other brothers, their wives and children annually at the OriMbieri cultural centre. The reason for this annual come together is to remind the sons of Mbaeri that they came from the same father and that their ancestral father worked hard to attain greatness in life, that had made him to have wandered about, survived, raised his family and even got to the height of taking the

prestigious Ozo title which was the highest title to be taken by great men in the traditional Igbo society. Hard work has remained an essential aspect of Mbieri and Igbo traditional value and men and women who made great strides in life are invested with titles as a mark of honour. Mbieri has made enormous achievements due to this philosophy.

MbaerilamNwaotuke's elevation to great height of legendary ancestor was epitomized by the ozo title he acquired. The importance attached to this by the people makes it imperative for the custodian of the OduOzoMbaeri, (from UbakuruMbieri) to raise up the OduOzoMbaeri (elephant tusk), at a point during the annual Ayamgba celebration, so that everybody would have a glance at it.

The OduMbaeri is the collective identity symbol of Mbieri people. Oral tradition has it that the OduOzoMbaeri or OduMbieri (elephant tusk) was the one used by their legendary father, Mbaeri for his Ozo title and that he gave this all important OduOzoMbaeri to his first son, Ubakuru before his death and he enjoined him to celebrate it annually.

The OduOzoMbaeri (OduMbieri) has remained an object of paternal identity to the people and has continued to serve as a unifying symbol for all the Mbieri people, both at home and in the diaspora. However, the significant value of this symbol lies in saying the truth at all times, because truth is the blood of every society and it endures all time.

The OduOzoMbaeri was symbolic in celebrating the Ayamgba festival which connotes the coming together of all sons of Mbieri and even their close neighbours after the strenuous season of farm work and before the harvest.

Mbaerilam founded the OriMbieriCentral Square

Nwaotuke settled permanently at a spot which is the present day OriMbieri Market square and it has continued to be of immense significance to the people. The ancestral father, Mbaerilam had directed his sons before his death that OriMbieri Square, that is, his house (obi) should continue to be a cultural centre for all annual events of Mbieri like the Ayamgba and Nta festivals.

It is a central rallying point for all the cultural activities of the whole Mbieri people. All traditional festivals, dances, etc., that encompass the whole of Mbieri land are held at OriMbieri Square. The custodians of the peoples' culture and tradition use such forums to remind the people of whom they are and the type of behaviour that is expected of them as true sons of the land. Therefore, it serves as a sustaining medium for the future of Mbieri.

The usefulness of the history of origin of mbieri toward sustaining mbieri culture and traditional values

Culture is referred to learned behaviour passed on from generation to generation. It symbolizes how people do their things (Haviland, 1978). Though the oral transmission of information of a people from generation to generation is prone to distortion and loss of valuable facts, but it has continued to serve the useful purpose of creating awareness and deepening the people's knowledge about themselves, their traditional societies and the events that happened in the past.

The oral tradition of the origin of Mbieri people has played a very significant role in enlightening the people of Mbieri about themselves, which is paramount for their development as a people. The knowledge of such events through oral tradition has equipped the people of Mbieri with useful information about their existence and environment and has created in them the spirit of oneness, hard work and ingenuity which has enabled them to succeed where others have failed.

It is a fact that a people without a historical past are like a people without a future, because the knowledge of your past will help you to plan well for the present and avoid those pitfalls of the past. And it would also encourage people to pursue more vigorously those tenets and good works that helped those who lived before them to succeed, in order to have a guaranteed blissful future.

It has also helped in binding the different people and villages that make up the entity together as a people with common descent and encouraged the spirit of unity, co-operation and peaceful co-existence. Their common identity slogan of *Mbieri-ogu-ofo-na-ofo-asato* is used to remind the people, especially during the celebration of their numerous annual traditional festivals, of their common descent from *MbaerilamNwaotuoke* and to admonish them to strive to be true Mbieri people in their relationship with other *Mbieri people*. This knowledge has helped the people to a great extent to cope with the challenges of their existence and to transform their environment to suit them whilst striving to maintain/uphold those culture and traditional values handed over to them by their predecessors.

It has also encouraged the people to pursue good and worthy lives and eschew evil/bad behaviour. During their numerous annual festivals, especially the Ayamgba festival of UbakuruMbieri, the custodians of the people's traditional institutions use the forum to admonish all Mbierians and erring ones were advised to change for the better in their best interest. Recalcitrant or erring members of the community were usually used to compose songs during the Amuma annual festival.

Conclusion

Oral tradition as a source of historical narrative has been used in this paper to portray the culture and traditional values of Mbieri people through their legendary

MbaerilamNwaotuoke. In this study, he symbolized patience, hard work, obedience to the laws governing his environment and a precursor of a rich way of life which the people of Mbieri have sustained. Therefore, the fear of Igbo language heading to extinction cannot be true with the celebration of Mbieri culture by Mbieri people at home and in the diaspora.

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