

METHODS IN THE COLLECTION AND INTERPRETATION OF ORAL EVIDENCE: THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for scholars who were using oral evidence in African historical reconstruction to begin with an apology for a shortage of written material, which had compelled them to make recourse to oral evidence.¹ Such apologies were running alongside with a learned battle by African historians for the recognition of oral tradition as a valid source of historical reconstruction. By the seventies, the battle had been won in favour of oral tradition.

Since then, an unusual interest in the reconstruction of African history from oral evidence has been generated among scholars. In line with this trend, it is becoming increasingly difficult for any work on African history, even if it deals with our literate age, to be accepted as complete without any evidence of the use of oral sources. Thus oral evidence is not only a valid but also an essential source of historical reconstruction.

The growing importance of oral evidence as a source of history has turned the attention of many scholars to a relentless and progressive search for a methodology that could be used in the collection and interpretation of oral evidence. This paper is a humble attempt to contribute to the continuing search for a more definite and systematic approach to the collection and interpretation of oral evidence.

For our purpose, oral evidence is any information that is given by the word of mouth concerning the past. It therefore encompasses both oral tradition and such contemporary accounts as eyewitness testimonies, hearsay, and reminiscences.

HOW TO COLLECT ORAL EVIDENCE

Determination, endurance, patience, honesty, and a sense of mission are some of the attributes demanded of any researcher who intends to go into fieldwork. The choice of the field of work would be determined, of course, by the nature of the project which the researcher has decided to undertake. Most scholars have suggested, that after ascertaining the subject matter of research and locating the field of work, the researcher should, in addition to having a letter of identification or introduction from his own institution, obtain government permit for the proposed fieldwork. This would give the research a stamp of authority, reduce suspicion, and allay any fears it might engender in Government circles and among the citizens of the area where the data collection would be carried out.²

If the researcher is working in a community whose language he does not understand, it is absolutely necessary that he hires an interpreter/research assistant. The selection of an interpreter is very important, and it should be done as objectively and as carefully as the "selection of historical facts." Some scholars have recommended as interpreters "homespun undergraduates with strong family traditions."³ Such interpreters, it is argued, have sufficient grasp of the standard of English language required for translation; they could also help locate some areas of historical interest or collect historical tales. However, undergraduate history students are not recommended because, they could adulterate information with the strong preconceptions they may have had about the history being investigated.⁴ Before engaging an interpreter, it is also necessary to understand the politics of the community. If factions exist, then the interpreter should be somebody who would not be seen as representing the interest of any one faction. Otherwise, information could be distorted. The interpreter should not be an "alien" in his own society. He must be an individual who is properly rooted in his culture. He must be a person of respectable social standing and noble manners, whose request for interviews could be readily accepted. Outside the pecuniary benefit associated with his engagement, the interpreter should be somebody who is heartedly committed to the project.

Having engaged an appropriate interpreter, the researcher, with the aid of the interpreter, proceeds to make a list of the possible informants - his real bibliography. How this list is compiled would determine, to a large extent, the content and quality of the final product of the research.

x Indeed, it is instructive that the list of informants should reflect the different social segments, units, and classes of the community being studied.⁵ The list should include both literate and non-literate informants, although some historians would, more preferably, engage informants who may not have had knowledge of their history as contained in written sources.⁶ Chiefs, members and heads of political, social, religious, and economic institutions and bodies, whose past activities and functions made the historical process, should also make the list of informants. Consideration should also be given to age in the choice of informants. Generally, historians choose adults of all ages with more concentration on the oldest.⁷ The list of informants should also include as many females as possible. The evidence of females is often overlooked by many historians. This has been part of the problem in identifying the role of woman in the historical process.

The choice of informants is followed by the actual collection of data through interviews, although the need to identify more informants or discard some of the old ones may occasionally arise in the course of the interviews. The date, time, and place of any interview should be fixed in agreement with the informant. On no avoidable account should the researcher arrive late for an interview or fail to attend it without notifying the informant. Some informants would not accept the rescheduling of an interview that failed to hold as a result of the researcher's inability to turn up.

One question is urgently important. How many informants should a researcher interview at a time? Opinion is divided on this question. Some historians⁸ have recommended that in a non-centralised society, where there are no national griots and where knowledge of the history is diffused throughout the society, it is more appropriate to conduct group interviews in which more than one informant can be interviewed at the same time. Others would prefer individual interviews in the centralised societies, where national historians exist who relate the national history.⁹

The argument in support of the individual interview for the societies with already established or transmitted traditions is that few individuals in a group interview would have the courage to challenge national griots. Therefore, the group testimony would hardly add new information to already pre-selected evidence.¹⁰ If, indeed, any evidence is added, it may corroborate rather than challenge the information of the traditional historians. But in an individual

interview, individual informants do not hesitate to give evidence against what seems already to be unquestionable.

On the other hand, the reason advanced for the group interview in non-centralised societies are: that they are time-saving; they could resolve differences arising from individual testimonies; in short, they have in-built checks and balances; and, moreover, in the egalitarian societies where knowledge of the past is collectively acquired and retained, it is appropriate to tap it collectively through the group interview.¹¹

However, experience has revealed that the group interview method may not successfully apply to all egalitarian societies. In some communities, it is difficult to persuade individuals of different social statuses, ages, and sexes to come together for discussion. Also, where the informants have agreed to come together, it still becomes difficult for the researcher to get the desired results, as discussions either may develop into a quarrel or may be dominated by loquacious individuals who are not necessarily more knowledgeable than other informants.¹² Because of all these problems, it is advisable that the researcher, before conducting group interviews in any community, should seek to know the possible reaction of the informants should they be grouped together.¹³ Eventually, therefore, the nature of the society is what will determine whether the researcher would employ group or individual method of getting the required information. It is not a mantra that the individual interview method is for centralised societies and the group interview method for non-centralised societies. A combination of the two methods can be used in any of the societies. Webster applied both methods in recording the history of the Teso in East Africa and Erim used them in his research on the Idoma in West Africa.¹⁴

In any interview - group or individual - an informant would not give any evidence if he is not asked to do so; and it is the nature of the questions asked that would determine the evidence he would give. This is where the need for a questionnaire arises. Thus the researcher must prepare a list of the major questions he would ask the informants. The questions are described as "major" because, some other subsidiary questions may arise in the course of an interview. With regard to the type of questions that should be asked, Vansina has suggested that vague, not leading, questions should be asked, as such questions would provoke a wide range of evidence from the informant.¹⁵

Erim gives an example of a vague question as: "Tell me all you know about a certain Oguiche in Otukpoland?"¹⁶ The historian should also manipulate the interview process in such a way that the informant testifies normally. Vansina states that such a manipulation would depend on the individual tact of the researcher. He notes, however, that there is "one general rule, and that is, that the informant must not know whether the fieldworker is or is not interested in his testimony, for if he does, he will distort."¹⁷ However, there is a divergence between Vansina's "general rule" and empirical field situations. In fact, the kind of indifference suggested by Vansina under the so called "general rule" is naturally difficult to maintain by a researcher in all interview processes. In certain cases, rather, the informant would need to be convinced that his information is important and would be of great interest and value to the researcher before he feels pleased to give it freely. In a four month's fieldwork in Ugep community of the upper Cross River region of Nigeria in 1982,¹⁸ this writer met with several informants who wanted to be impressed that their evidence was extremely important, interesting, and superior to any other. One of them even declared that the account he gave was the real one, which no other individual could give, and advised the writer to feel contented with the information the writer got from him.

All set, how does the researcher record the evidence from the informant? What kind of instruments does he record the evidence with? Experienced researchers, without any known exception, have recommended that pen, paper, and tape recorder be used in recording evidence. Some scholars suggest that in all cases evidence should be recorded in long hand on paper alongside with tape-recording, except where an informant objects to the use of any of them.¹⁹ Yet, there are other historians who would prefer to tape-record all "fixed" traditions and take down in long hand all free evidence.

Whether with a paper and pen or with a tape recorder, the researcher, before recording down the evidence, should note down: whether the interview is a group or individual testimony; the names, addresses, ages, sexes, and credentials of the informants; and the place, date, and time of the interview. He should also record down the information under provisional titles such as "Traditions of Origin and Migrations", "Economic Activities", "Social Life", and "The Coming of the Missionaries", depending on the nature of the information. This may seem unnecessary; but it would, during the process of analysis and interpretation of the evidence, save the historian much time, as it

would be less difficult for him to refer occasionally to the kind of evidence he needs at any particular time.

Coming to the actual recording of evidence, the historian or the interpreter should take down the evidence on paper as fast and legibly as possible. Where an informant speaks too fast to make this possible, it may be necessary to persuade him to reduce his speed. He may also be asked to pause, where necessary, to answer any subsidiary questions arising from any evidence already given. The evidence, it must be emphasized, should, as much as possible, be recorded down in the language, manner, tone, and, spirit in which it is given. For example, exclamations should be recorded with the appropriate signs. The researcher's personal commentaries and explanations should not be admixed with the original evidence. They should be indicated in parentheses. It has been advised that at the end of the interviews, the researcher could go back to the major informants to record down, for a second time, the evidence they had given at the first interview.²⁰ This "revisit," which may not employ the use of a tape recorder, would enable the researcher to detect and check inconsistencies, omissions, and conflicts in the evidence already given. Some historians would do the revisit but in a simpler way. They would revisit the informant and give him his version of the evidence either to reject, accept, or modify it.²¹

It is observed that some researchers do not record all information from the informants, or that they discard any information that is not considered useful. This may have stemmed from the realization that a reasonable amount of the information which is sometimes recorded is not always directly relevant to the immediate purpose of the research. But even though this is the case, it is advisable that as much information as is possible should be collected. Even if some of it is found not to be immediately or directly useful, it should not be discarded. The reason is that any evidence considered irrelevant by one researcher may be directly useful to another researcher in the same or related discipline. It may also open a window into another vista of historical inquiry.

However, each successive interview should be followed almost immediately by a transcription and translation of the evidence collected.²² Experienced researchers have warned that the transcription exercise is arduous and time-consuming; but it enables the historian to have an initial general view of the history of the community and, therefore, be at an advantage to discover

lacunae, which he could fill up before leaving the field of work. The transcripts are then translated, where necessary.

In the late nineteen-sixties, some historians, for example, Professor P. Curtin, emphatically suggested that the translation exercise should be carried out with the assistance of a professional linguist, who would ensure that the translation met the standards set by linguists.²³ However, later historians like Professor G.N. Uzoigwe, with sufficient experience in field research, have not only successfully challenged and dismissed this suggestion as expensive, time-consuming, complicated, and largely idealistic but have also demonstrated in practical terms, that the services of a professional linguist, as prescribed by Curtin, are not of vital necessity for the translation of oral evidence.²⁴

The collection of evidence ends with its successful transcription and translation. The documents, after use has been made of them, are catalogued and appropriately branded with identification titles and the researcher's particulars. They are later deposited in the local archives.²⁵ Some historians recommend that the documents be kept in the archives before the researcher leaves the field of work.²⁶ However, it is important that the documents, sooner or later, should be kept in the archives. Not only would this enable future researchers to make use of them, but the researcher could turn to them when his own copies are missing.

There is the important issue of reward for information collected. Many individuals believe in *quid pro quo*. If they give they expect, immediately or later, to get something in return. There are, therefore, some informants who would expect reward from the researcher for the information given. The researcher is naturally obliged to return good for good. It has been considered, that in order not to create problems for future researchers in the field, the historian should not reward the informant in cash, if he cannot avoid giving any reward. It is also important, that reward, if any, should be made at the end, not the beginning, of an interview. In my fieldwork in Ugep in 1982, for some compelling reasons, I gave Ten Naira (N10.00) to an informant just before the commencement of interview. About 40 minutes into the interview, the informant maintained an astonishing muteness to any further question I asked. He eventually insisted, that the information he had so far given was enough for the money I gave him. It took strenuous explanation of the significance and future benefits of the interview for him to be persuaded to

continue the interview without further pay. Thus payment of cash to informants should, as much as possible, be avoided in order not to occasion a commercialisation of field evidence. Indeed, many scholars have recommended alternative rewards such as drinks, clothes, and snap-shots. In some societies, request for the printed copies of testimonies have been made by informants. Jane Martin indicates from her field experience among the Glebo in eastern Liberia, that this type of request was made by informants. She wrote: "Since many people in the area where I worked read and write Glebo... I found that I am expected to publish some common traditions in both English and Glebo and somehow make such a work available."²⁷ Generally, however, the type of reward which the researcher gives, and how he gives it, would be determined by the norms and values of the society which the researcher is investigating.

INTERPRETING ORAL EVIDENCE

The evidence collected by the historian constitutes but the "raw material" from which the consumable history is produced. Therefore, after returning from the field, the historian places the evidence before him and begins the onerous task of reconstructing the history for which the evidence was collected. Success in this task would depend on the historian's ability to interpret his evidence. The interpretation of evidence, as Edwin Fenton has pointed out, involves not only the careful selection of some of it but also the presentation of what has been selected in a certain way that makes meaning.²⁸ The process of selection and presentation of the evidence, simple as it may seem, is, indeed, a most difficult challenge which the historian would face. For instance, the accuracy of what is selected has to be ascertained; distortions have to be detected; and weak and vague evidence has to be further corroborated. Such a task is both mentally and physically exerting, and the rate of intellectual effusion involved may sometimes threaten the sanity of the historian. Thus learned and experienced scholars, in order to facilitate the interpretation of oral data, have suggested some methods and aids by which the historian could look at the evidence.

Much of African history, especially in the period before colonial rule, is enwrapped in oral tradition and other types of oral evidence. The interpretation of oral data in general and oral tradition, especially, has posed serious problems to historians. It is a fact, that much of oral tradition could often be correctly repeated by different informants. But as Edna Bay has

correctly pointed out, "mere repetition is insufficient justification for accepting historical evidence." Perhaps, aware of this point, scholars have suggested, for instance, that in interpreting oral tradition, or other types of oral evidence, the historian should identify its variants, if any. If the variants of a tradition, or any other oral evidence, are identified, they could be used to check one another.²⁹

The historian should also search for certain words, phrases, clauses, and sentences which, in any oral evidence, give clues to the nature of beliefs, religion, cosmology, economic activities, and political system etc. Such clues could enable the historian to make reliable suggestions and conclusions in the process of interpretation. Sometimes, epics and songs - very often ignored - are embodiments of history. They are laconic. But they could be analysed and interpreted by a careful application of reasoning. They contain words, phrases, and sentences which in most economical ways provide clues or make direct reference to past situations, events, places, and personages.

The historian must develop the ability to detect distortions such as stereotypes, which are usually wrongly taken as accurate because of their popularity and frequency of transmission.³⁰ The claim, in their traditions, by many African communities, that they migrated from the "East" is an example of a stereotype. Much of the evidence given by literate informants is usually infested with "feedbacks". The feedbacks, for instance, may consist in information and knowledge gained from written accounts. The informant, in most cases, assimilates the information and unconsciously presents it to the historian as a tradition. The historian who desires to make an accurate interpretation of his data should be able to identify such feedbacks.³¹ This means, then, that the historian must study the informant and the evidence together, if he is to make an objective interpretation of the evidence. For instance, testimonies from literate informants are more likely to be infested with feedbacks than those from non-literate ones.

The historian can also use the aid of natural phenomena, material culture, and written sources to interpret oral evidence. Where, for example, relative or absolute dates are difficult to establish by reliance on genealogy or any other oral data, the historian should, where possible, make recourse to written records³² or archaeological evidence. The occurrence of eclipses whose dates have been recorded and radio-carbon dating of archaeological artifacts could

serve as a useful guide to the chronology of oral evidence. Similarly, conflicts and gaps occurring in the course of interpretation could be addressed with information from written sources, archaeology, and linguistic evidence. For example, Professor E. J. Alagoa, using the spread of Opraiza bronzes and written sources, was able to suggest from oral tradition, that the Gbaramatu in the Niger Delta participated in both internal and external trade on the Escravos River.³³

Professor Okon E. Uya has indicated in detail, though in principle, how the technique of carbon dating can be used in tackling the problem of chronology associated with oral tradition.³⁴ Alagoa has also remarkably used linguistic evidence contained in the works of Professor Kay Williamson in dating Ijo oral history.³⁵ Place names, clan names, language, and cultural elements are some means by which the historian can also interpret oral evidence. Similarities in names of persons or objects, as well as in language and cultural elements are sometimes indicators of common origin or common historical experiences. Vansina had used such similarities to confirm the accuracy of the Bakuba migrations in Central Africa.³⁶

It is also possible to use totemic symbols in the interpretation of oral evidence. A totem has been defined as "a forbiddance which could be an animal, a plant or a material object."³⁷ If oral evidence, for instance, claims a common origin for groups that live far apart or are characteristically disparate, the historian may want to ascertain the claim by looking for totems which are common to the groups. Groups that had lived together for many years have been found to share common totems. Some historians, for example, David Cohen, had used this method in the interpretation of the traditions of Busoga in Buganda.³⁸ Erim had also depended on the same method to interpret the traditions of the Idoma of Benue Valley.³⁹

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The collection of oral evidence is not a wild-nut-picking exercise. It is more or less a stage drama, where the researcher employs a delicate combination of action and reasoning. Armed with a government permit, the researcher enters his field of work, intrepid of embarrassment. Where necessary, an interpreter/research assistant is hired, with whose aid the researcher decides and locates his informants.

The actual collection of data through interviews follows this step. Pen, paper, and tape recorder are used in the recording of information. Informants are either individually or collectively interviewed, depending on the nature of the society or specific circumstances.

Transcription and translation closely follow each successful interview. Satisfied that enough evidence has been collected, the researcher leaves the field of work to begin another, and more difficult, task of interpreting the evidence.

But he could employ some methods to make less difficult the task of interpretation. Variability in the information received rather aids the historian to check the evidence and to select his "facts." The historian must also train as a "detective" if he could get his evidence rid of stereotypes, feedbacks, and any other distortions. Through a combination of analysis and careful evaluation, the historian can come up with an accurate interpretation of the evidence. Important and major natural phenomena, written sources, archaeological finds, linguistic evidence, cultural similarities, and totemic symbols could also serve as a useful guide to data interpretation.

As we have seen, especially in the case of data collection, the various methods recommended derive from the experiences and knowledge of different scholars. The methods are by no means presented as a "canon." The reason is that their application may yield similar or entirely diverse results in different societies. Whatever the case, no researcher can ignore the application of the techniques. In fact, a radical departure from them could prove disastrous for any researcher. In the same vein, the historian who ignores the learned and experienced opinions and suggestions regarding the interpretation of oral evidence does so at his peril.

NOTES

¹See E.J. Alagoa, "The Present State of Oral Tradition Studies", mimeo, School of Humanities, University of Port Harcourt, 1976. For more related information see G.N. Uzoigwe, "On Values and Oral Tradition: Towards a New Field of Historical Research", paper presented at the Faculty of Arts Seminar, University of Calabar, Calabar, 1983.

²E.O. Erim, *The Idoma Nationality 1600-1900: Problems of Studying the Origin and Development of Ethnicity*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1981),

pp.127-128.

³ G.N. Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa: Reflections from Field Experiences in Bunyoro", in *African Studies Review*. Vol. XVI, No. 2 (1973), p.192.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.

⁵ For example, see David Henige, *Oral Historiography*. (London: Longman), 1982, pp. 46-47.

⁶ Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa", p.187.

⁷ Henige, *Historiography*, p. 46.

⁸ Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa", p.193.

⁹ Henige, *Historiography*, pp.49-50.

¹⁰ Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa," p.193.

¹¹ *Ibid.* See also Henige, *Historiography*, p.49.

¹² *Ibid.* of Uzoigwe, p. 193. *Ibid.* of Henige, p. 51.

¹³ *Ibid.* of Henige.

¹⁴ Erim O. Erim, "Field Techniques for Recording the History of Segmentary Societies", unpub. paper, Department of History, University of Calabar, Nigeria, 1988. p.11.

¹⁵ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p.202.

¹⁶ Erim, "Field Techniques", p.9.

¹⁷ Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, p.202.

¹⁸ The research was conducted from July through October, 1982, during the writer's undergraduate studies. The product of the research is "The Impact of Colonialism on Ugep", a B.A. Research Project, Department of History, University of Calabar, Calabar, June, 1983.

¹⁹ See R. G. Armstrong, "The Collection of Oral Traditions in Africa", in *Ann University*, Abidjan, Series H,n.d.,p. 580, cited in Erim, *Idoma Nationality*, p.151. Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa," p. 190.

²⁰ Vansina, *Oral Traditional*, p.201.

²¹ Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa", p.194.

²² Henige, *Historiography*, pp.63-64.

²³ Cited in Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa", p.189. For greater details consult Philip D. Curtin, "Field Techniques for Collecting and Processing Oral Data", in *The Journal of African History*, IX,3 (1968), pp. 367-385.

²⁴ *Ibid.* of Uzoigwe, pp. 189-190.

Apart from Alagoa, who made use of a linguist for his *A History of the Niger Delta*. (Ibadan: Ibadan University press, 1972), xiii-xiv, many other African historians have translated and used oral evidence without the assistance of professional linguists. For example, Uzoigwe, *Revolution and Revolt in Bunyoro Kitara*, 1970. M.E. Noah, *Old Calabar: The City States and the Europeans 1800-1885*, 1980. Erim, *Idoma Nationality*. O.E. Uya, *A History of Oron People of the Lower Cross River Basin*, 1984; O. Ikime, *Merchant prince of the Niger Delta*, 1968. W.I. Ofonogoro, *Trade and Imperialism in Southern Nigeria 1881-1929*, 1979. I. R. Amadi, *Anaedo Nnewi: The Making of An Igbo Polity 1500-1924*, 1999.

²⁵ Uzoigwe, "Recording the Oral History of Africa," p.191.

²⁶ Henige, *Historiography*, p.65.

²⁷ J. Martin, "Oral Tradition and African Historical Reconstruction", in Erim O. Erim and Okon E. Uya, (eds.), *Perspectives and Methods of Studying African History*. (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1984), p.72.

²⁸ See Edwin Fenton, "History as Interpretation", in E. Fenton, (ed.), *Problems in World History*. (Gleniew, 1969).

²⁹ For a practical example, see R. R. Atkinson, "The Traditions of the Early Kings of Byganda: Myth, History, and Structural Analysis", in *History in Africa: Journal of Method*. Vol. 2 (1975), pp. 17-58.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion of this and similar distortions, see Jan Vansina, "Once Upon a Time: Oral Traditions as History in Africa", in Felix Gilbert and Stephen Graubard, (eds.), *Historical Studies Today*. (New York: 1972, pp.413-435. Henige, *Historiography*, pp.91-96.

³¹ For example see *Ibid.* of Henige, p.84.

³² David Henige, "On Method: An Apologia and a Plea", in *History in Africa: Journal of Method*. Vol. 1, (1974), p.5.

³³ See E. J. Alagoa's "Opraza and Early Trade on the Escravos: A Note on the Interpretation of the Oral Tradition of a Small Group", in *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*. Vol. V, No. 1, (1969), pp.151-156.

³⁴ Okon Edet Uya, *African Histor: Some Problems in Methodology and Perspectives*. 2nd ed. (Calabar, Nigeria: Clear Lines Publications, 2004), pp.64-66.

³⁵ E.J Alagoa, "The Interdisciplinary Approach to African History", in M.B. Abasiattai, (Ed.), *Expanding Froniters of African History: The Interdisciplinary Methodology* (Calabar, Nigeria: University of Calabar Press, 1988), pp.523-524.

³⁶ See Vansina, "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba-II. Results", in *The Journal of African History*, 1.2, (1960), pp.257-270.

³⁷ Erim O. Erim, "Oral Tradition and the Development of Nationality," in Erim and Uya, *Perspectives and Methods*, p.39.

³⁸ D.V. Cohen, *The Historical Tradition of Busoga* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 28-69.

³⁹ For how the author did it see his works, *Idoma Nationality*, and, in greater detail, "Cultural Totemism and the Idoma Pre-colonial History", in Abasiattai, *Expanding Frontiers*, pp.365-396.