

Oral Traditions as Vehicles of Historical Knowledge Transmission

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper critically examines the role of oral traditions as instruments for transmitting historical knowledge across generations. Despite increasing reliance on written records, oral narratives persist as epistemic vehicles that encode social memory, cultural identity, and historical consciousness. The study interrogates the mechanisms, reliability, and limitations of oral knowledge transmission in African and global contexts.

Methodology: Employing a qualitative doctrinal approach, the study conducts a critical review of primary theoretical texts and contemporary empirical analyses. A comparative framework is applied to assess the epistemological validity of oral traditions against archaeological, linguistic, and written historical evidence.

Findings: Oral traditions emerge as dynamic, adaptive repositories of historical knowledge, capable of preserving complex social and political histories. They facilitate communal memory reconstruction, moral instruction, and identity negotiation. However, the reliability of oral transmission is mediated by performance context, mnemonic devices, and socio-political influences, which can both preserve and distort historical content.

Originality: By synthesizing classical theoretical foundations with recent empirical studies, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of oral traditions as legitimate historical sources. It challenges the epistemic hierarchy that privileges written records and situates oral knowledge within a critical historiographical and cognitive framework.

Keywords: *oral traditions, historical knowledge, epistemology, memory, African historiography, narrative transmission*

1.0 Introduction

The question of how human societies transmit historical knowledge remains central to historiography, anthropology, and cultural studies. Conventional historiography has long privileged written records, often marginalizing oral traditions as anecdotal or unreliable (Goody, 1987; Ong, 2002). Yet, across the globe, particularly in African, Indigenous, and early literate societies, oral narratives have functioned as the primary conduit for social memory, historical consciousness, and cultural identity (Vansina, 1985; Finnegan, 2012). This tension between oral and literate epistemologies raises critical questions: Can oral traditions be treated as legitimate historical sources? What mechanisms ensure the fidelity of transmitted knowledge? How do performative, mnemonic, and socio-cultural factors influence the construction of historical narratives through oral means? Oral traditions are not mere storytelling; they operate as dynamic systems for encoding, transmitting, and reconstructing collective memory. Lord's (1960) pioneering work on the "singer of tales" established the oral-formulaic method, demonstrating that ostensibly fluid narratives exhibit structural consistency across iterations. Similarly, Vansina (1985) articulated methodological principles for extracting historical data from oral narratives, showing that memory, repetition, and performance patterns allow reconstruction of complex historical events. Contemporary empirical studies corroborate these theoretical foundations: Schniter et al. (2017) highlight the role of older adults in Tsimane Amerindian societies as knowledge repositories, while Akumu Juma (2022) demonstrates the cognitive mechanisms underpinning story-based historical transmission in Afro-Indigenous contexts. Despite these insights, the critical historiographical evaluation of oral traditions reveals inherent epistemic tensions. Oral knowledge is mediated by social hierarchy, audience expectations, political motives, and mnemonic constraints, which can introduce bias or selective omission (Tonkin, 2009; Ikuenobe, 2018). However, these very mechanisms are also adaptive, allowing narratives to remain culturally salient and relevant across generations. In other words, oral traditions function not merely as static repositories but as performative, evolving instruments of historical cognition, bridging the cognitive, social, and moral dimensions of communal life.

The African context provides a particularly rich case study. With limited precolonial written documentation, African societies relied extensively on griots, elders, and

ritualized storytellers to preserve political history, genealogies, and social norms (Abdullahi *et al.*, 2021; Saka *et al.*, 2024). Critical analysis reveals that oral traditions in these societies are epistemically robust when triangulated with archaeology, linguistics, and cross-generational corroboration (Whiteley, 2002; Echo-Hawk, 2000). This triangulation underscores the capacity of oral transmission to maintain historical integrity while simultaneously reflecting socio-cultural evolution. This paper adopts a doctrinal qualitative approach, interrogating oral traditions through critical analysis of theoretical frameworks, empirical studies, and comparative historiography. The aim is to illuminate the epistemological value of oral knowledge, evaluate its methodological robustness, and situate oral narratives within the broader discourse on historical knowledge transmission. By foregrounding the analytical lens over mere description, this study challenges entrenched hierarchies of historical evidence and proposes a nuanced understanding of how societies negotiate memory, identity, and history in the absence or alongside written documentation.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Oral Traditions

Oral traditions have long been theorized as systematic repositories of cultural and historical knowledge rather than mere anecdotal or performative entertainment (Foley, 1988; Lord, 1960). Lord's (1960) singer of tales framework established that oral narratives exhibit structural patterns and formulaic devices, allowing storytellers to reproduce and transmit complex historical sequences reliably. From a cognitive standpoint, these formulaic strategies facilitate memory retention, enabling accurate reconstruction of events without written records. Similarly, Ong (2002) argues that orality and literacy operate as fundamentally different epistemological modes: oral societies encode history relationally, privileging mnemonic and performative devices over linear, abstract documentation. This distinction is critical; it challenges the epistemic hierarchy that has historically favored written archives over oral narratives (Goody, 1987). Vansina (1985) extended these insights to African historiography, systematically demonstrating that oral traditions can be methodologically harnessed for reconstructing historical events. His framework emphasizes the verification of narratives through cross-generational consistency, corroboration with external

sources, and attention to sociocultural context. Vansina's contribution remains seminal because it establishes that oral traditions are neither arbitrary nor inherently unreliable; rather, they operate within structured cognitive and social frameworks that ensure continuity and fidelity.

2.2 Oral Traditions and Historical Epistemology

While the structural reliability of oral narratives is well-documented, critical engagement reveals that oral historiography is epistemically contingent. Tonkin (2009) highlights the tension between memory fidelity and social mediation: narrators selectively emphasize, suppress, or reinterpret events to align with communal norms or political imperatives. Ikuenobe (2018) situates this within epistemology, suggesting that knowledge transmitted orally is both communal and context-dependent, requiring scholars to interrogate the interplay of memory, authority, and audience. In essence, oral traditions do not provide raw facts; they provide socially negotiated interpretations of historical reality. Moreover, oral narratives operate within performative and mnemonic frameworks that differ across societies. Akumu Juma (2022) demonstrates that older adults in Afro-Indigenous contexts serve as custodians of communal memory, embedding historical knowledge in storytelling that integrates moral, spiritual, and social codes. These narratives are performative acts, where accuracy is maintained through repetition, narrative scaffolding, and community reinforcement. Schniter et al. (2017) provide complementary evidence in the Tsimane Amerindian society, showing that oral knowledge is selectively reinforced in late-life individuals, indicating an adaptive "service niche" for elders as repositories of historical memory.

2.3 Oral Traditions in African Historical Consciousness

Africa's reliance on oral transmission presents a rich site for epistemological and methodological inquiry. Precolonial African societies frequently lacked written documentation, making oral narratives indispensable for political, social, and genealogical continuity (Abdullahi *et al.*, 2021; Saka *et al.*, 2024). Griots, elders, and ritualized storytellers served as institutionalized memory banks, transmitting complex histories through structured performances. Critically, these narratives were not static; they adapted to shifting socio-political circumstances while retaining core factual content, demonstrating a dynamic interplay between memory fidelity and cultural

evolution (Finnegan, 2012; Whiteley, 2002). Echo-Hawk (2000) highlights cases where oral traditions have been corroborated with archaeological evidence, illustrating that oral histories can retain remarkable accuracy over centuries. Such triangulation challenges conventional skepticism and underscores the epistemic potential of oral traditions as valid historical sources. Nevertheless, critical questions remain: To what extent does social mediation, mnemonic decay, or political agenda distort historical knowledge? And can oral knowledge be systematically validated without reducing it to written paradigms? These questions are central to evaluating oral traditions as historiographical tools.

2.4 Mechanisms of Knowledge Transmission

The reliability of oral traditions hinges on specific cognitive and performative mechanisms. Lord (1960) identifies formulaic expressions, episodic repetition, and thematic structuring as core mnemonic devices. These techniques allow narrators to maintain consistency while adapting narratives to context. Ong (2002) frames these strategies within a broader theoretical lens, arguing that orality relies on situational cognition and relational memory, contrasting with linear abstraction typical of literate societies. Finnegan (2012) elaborates on these mechanisms, emphasizing that the performance context—the audience, ritual setting, and social hierarchy—directly impacts how knowledge is encoded, transmitted, and validated. Oral traditions are thus epistemologically dynamic: while they preserve factual content, they are also performative acts of social negotiation. Tonkin (2009) warns that historians must recognize these layers of mediation rather than treating oral narratives as static records. This nuanced understanding enables scholars to extract historical insights while accounting for cultural, mnemonic, and performative influences.

2.5 Challenges and Critiques

Despite their epistemic potential, oral traditions face significant methodological challenges. Critics often question their reliability due to memory decay, narrative embellishment, and socio-political bias (Ikuenobe, 2018; Tonkin, 2009). In African historiography, Abdullahi et al. (2021) note that oral sources can be manipulated to legitimize political claims or social hierarchies. Similarly, Goody (1987) cautions against uncritical valorization of oral narratives, emphasizing the need for triangulation with material evidence, linguistic analysis, and cross-cultural

comparison. However, these critiques must be contextualized. Distortions in oral narratives are not necessarily epistemic failures; they reflect the adaptive and interpretive functions of oral historiography. As Finnegan (2012) and Whiteley (2002) argue, the interplay between memory, performance, and social context enables oral traditions to remain culturally and historically meaningful across generations. Critical scholarship must therefore balance skepticism with recognition of oral traditions' methodological and epistemic legitimacy.

2.6 Contemporary Empirical Insights

Recent empirical research supports the historical validity of oral traditions when evaluated critically. Schniter et al. (2017) demonstrate that targeted transmission of knowledge by elder Tsimane adults maintains factual continuity while embedding social norms. Akumu Juma (2022) finds similar patterns among Afro-Indigenous storytellers, highlighting cognitive strategies that enhance retention and fidelity. These studies indicate that oral knowledge transmission is not haphazard but systematically organized, employing mnemonic scaffolds, repetitive structures, and performative reinforcement to preserve historical information. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches integrating archaeology, linguistics, and cognitive science reveal that oral traditions often encode accurate historical markers over long temporal spans (Echo-Hawk, 2000; Mithen, 1996). This empirical convergence challenges the assumption that oral histories are inherently inferior to written records, reinforcing their status as valid epistemic vehicles.

2.7 Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature demonstrates that oral traditions function as critical vehicles of historical knowledge, underpinned by structured mnemonic techniques, performative strategies, and social validation. While theoretical and empirical studies affirm their epistemic potential, significant gaps remain. First, there is insufficient critical interrogation of how social and political dynamics shape historical content across generations. Second, few studies systematically compare the fidelity of oral traditions across cultures and temporal scales. Finally, methodological frameworks for integrating oral narratives with material evidence remain underdeveloped, limiting the capacity to fully harness oral sources for rigorous historiography. This study seeks to address these gaps by critically evaluating oral traditions as epistemic instruments,

examining the cognitive, social, and performative mechanisms that sustain historical knowledge, and situating these findings within a comparative, doctrinal framework. By moving beyond superficial description, it aims to deepen the understanding of how oral narratives mediate memory, identity, and historical consciousness across diverse societies.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative doctrinal research design, focusing exclusively on secondary sources to critically interrogate the epistemic value of oral traditions in transmitting historical knowledge. Doctrinal research, also termed library-based or desk-based research, is appropriate for this inquiry because the objective is not to collect empirical field data but to examine, analyze, and synthesize existing scholarly discourse, theoretical frameworks, and empirical findings (Finnegan, 2012; Tonkin, 2009). The critical nature of the research demands rigorous analysis of cognitive, social, and performative dimensions of oral traditions, interrogating how narratives encode, preserve, and transmit historical information. This approach allows for a deep examination of underlying mechanisms, epistemic reliability, and cultural contextualization without conflating description with validation.

3.2 Source Selection and Inclusion Criteria

Sources were selected using a combination of database search and citation tracking, focusing exclusively on peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal books, and authoritative monographs. Databases and platforms included Scopus-indexed journals, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, and Taylor & Francis Online, ensuring academic rigor. The inclusion criteria were:

- Explicit discussion of oral traditions, historical knowledge, or memory transmission.
- Publication in English and peer-reviewed status.
- Availability of empirical evidence or theoretical frameworks concerning oral narratives.
- Relevance to African, Indigenous, or global contexts for comparative analysis.

Exclusion criteria included: non-academic websites, anecdotal commentary, or sources lacking rigorous referencing. The final corpus consisted of 15 core sources previously approved, representing seminal theory, empirical studies, and interdisciplinary insights (Lord, 1960; Vansina, 1985; Schniter *et al.*, 2017; Akumu Juma, 2022).

3.3 Analytical Approach

A critical content analysis framework was applied, emphasizing thematic and epistemological interrogation rather than simple summarization. The process involved:

Thematic coding: Identifying recurring motifs across sources, including mnemonic strategies, performance structures, social mediation, and historical accuracy.

Comparative evaluation: Cross-examining African, Indigenous, and early literate societies to discern common cognitive and performative mechanisms.

Epistemic critique: Assessing sources for methodological robustness, biases, and interpretive frameworks, particularly where oral narratives intersect with archaeology, linguistics, and written records.

Synthesis of findings: Integrating insights to highlight the adaptive, dynamic, and credible nature of oral traditions as knowledge vehicles.

This analytical design ensures that the study is deeply critical, interrogating not only how oral traditions transmit history but also the conditions under which fidelity and distortion occur.

4. Results

4.1 Oral Traditions as Dynamic Repositories

Analysis of the selected sources reveals that oral traditions are highly structured repositories of historical knowledge, contrary to the assumption that they are unreliable or anecdotal (Lord, 1960; Vansina, 1985). Narrative structuring techniques such as formulaic expressions, repetition, and thematic scaffolding allow stories to preserve chronological, genealogical, and political information with remarkable consistency. For instance, Vansina (1985) demonstrates that cross-generational transmission among African griots maintains historical fidelity over centuries, with only minor adaptive modifications reflecting social and political context. Empirical evidence from Schniter *et al.* (2017) and Akumu Juma (2022) corroborates these

mechanisms. Among the Tsimane Amerindians and Afro-Indigenous storytellers, elders act as knowledge hubs, transmitting factual information interwoven with moral, social, and spiritual instruction. Oral traditions, therefore, operate not as static archives but as adaptive, performative knowledge systems. This dynamism allows narratives to maintain relevance while encoding historical facts, a feature often absent in written records constrained by linearity.

4.2 Cognitive and Mnemonic Mechanisms

The literature underscores the cognitive sophistication of oral transmission. Mnemonic devices such as repetition, rhyme, formulaic phrasing, and episodic storytelling enhance memory retention and recall (Lord, 1960; Ong, 2002; Finnegan, 2012). Performance contexts, including communal gatherings, ritual ceremonies, and intergenerational instruction, provide social reinforcement, further stabilizing historical narratives. Akumu Juma (2022) highlights that elders often use mnemonic storytelling to encode sequences of events, ensuring that the community retains consistent historical knowledge despite the absence of written documentation.

Critically, these mechanisms reveal that oral traditions are not random or improvisational but instead rely on sophisticated cognitive frameworks. They embody a deliberate structuring of knowledge that balances accuracy with performative flexibility, allowing the narratives to respond to evolving social conditions without sacrificing core historical content.

4.3 Social Mediation and Epistemic Validation

A recurring theme across sources is the role of social mediation in preserving historical knowledge. Tonkin (2009) and Ikuenobe (2018) argue that narrators operate within cultural, political, and social frameworks, selectively emphasizing or de-emphasizing events. While critics often view this as a source of distortion, it can also be interpreted as adaptive knowledge modulation, ensuring that historical narratives remain socially relevant and morally instructive. Whiteley (2002) further notes that oral traditions frequently interact with material culture and archaeological evidence, providing external validation and enhancing epistemic reliability. The results indicate that oral traditions function at the intersection of cognition, performance, and social authority. Elders, griots, and ritual storytellers are not mere conveyors of memory;

they are epistemic agents, negotiating history through performative, mnemonic, and culturally sanctioned mechanisms.

4.4 Limitations and Distortions

Despite their robustness, oral traditions are susceptible to selective distortion. Memory decay, political influence, and audience expectations can introduce variations over time (Tonkin, 2009; Abdullahi *et al.*, 2021). Goody (1987) and Echo-Hawk (2000) emphasize the necessity of triangulating oral narratives with archaeological and linguistic evidence to confirm historical accuracy. However, these “distortions” are not random; they reflect the dynamic interplay between memory fidelity and cultural adaptation, ensuring that narratives maintain relevance while preserving essential historical truths.

4.5 Comparative Insights

Comparative analysis across African, Indigenous, and early literate societies indicates common epistemic principles in oral transmission:

- Hierarchical reinforcement: Knowledge is often centralized in elders or designated storytellers.
- Structural consistency: Formulaic devices and episodic repetition ensure continuity.
- Adaptive modulation: Narratives evolve in response to social, political, and moral imperatives.
- Epistemic triangulation: Oral narratives intersect with material evidence, providing multi-source validation.

These principles reveal that oral traditions are systematic, adaptive, and epistemically robust, capable of preserving complex historical knowledge over extended temporal and spatial scales.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Integrative Interpretation of Findings

The results demonstrate that oral traditions are not inherently inferior or marginal to historical knowledge transmission; instead, they function as complex, adaptive epistemic systems that encode communal memory, cultural identity, and event

chronology in ways distinct from literate modes of historiography. The doctrinal analysis across thematic sources indicates that oral traditions rely on a combination of mnemonic structures, social reinforcement, and performative mechanisms that collectively facilitate knowledge retention with contextual flexibility. Lord's (1960) theory of oral-formulaic composition illustrates that patterns of repetition and structured phrasing are not random but intentional mechanisms that enhance cognitive recall. Similarly, Vansina's (1985) extensive work situates oral narrative within historical methodology, arguing that systematic evaluation such as cross-generational comparison and contextual interpretation allows historians to extract meaningful historical data from oral sources. These mechanisms fundamentally challenge the traditional epistemic hierarchy that privileges written records as the gold standard of historical evidence (Ong, 2002). Instead, oral traditions embody their own validation framework, one that integrates cognition, performance, and communal sanctioning to produce narratives that can be critically interrogated rather than dismissed. Oral traditions operate within performative contexts—ceremonial settings, community rituals, and pedagogical interactions—which serve to socialize historical knowledge through repeated reinforcement and communal participation. The findings reveal that oral transmission embodies both factual and normative dimensions of history, preserving not only sequences of events but also the values and social interpretations attached to those events.

5.2 Reconceptualizing Reliability and Distortion

A central theme emerging from this study is the reconceptualization of reliability. Traditional skepticism regards oral traditions as malleable and prone to distortion through memory decay or social influence. While it is true that narratives change over time, this “fluidity” does not necessarily undermine historical content; rather, it reveals how societies mediate memory in relation to prevailing social frameworks. Tonkin (2009) emphasizes that narrators inevitably adapt stories to resonate with contemporary social realities, suggesting that evolution in oral narratives is not evidence of unreliability but evidence of relevance and negotiation. Moreover, oral traditions do not exist in isolation. As shown in archaeological and anthropological contexts (Whiteley, 2002; Echo-Hawk, 2000), oral narratives can be corroborated with material evidence, demonstrating congruence between remembered accounts and

physical data. Such triangulation highlights how oral traditions and archaeological records are complementary rather than competing sources of historical knowledge.

It is important to emphasize that distortion and adaptation are distinct. Distortion implies random alteration detached from epistemic grounding, whereas adaptation reflects intentional negotiation of meaning within memory frameworks. This distinction is crucial because it foregrounds the agency of narrators as epistemic agents, not passive transmitters. They actively shape narratives to preserve meaning, relevance, and social coherence. This process should be treated as part of the methodology of knowledge transmission rather than a deviation from an idealized form of history.

5.3 A Critical Reappraisal of Oral Tradition Theory

While foundational theorists such as Lord (1960) and Vansina (1985) provide indispensable frameworks for understanding oral narratives, contemporary literature calls for a more nuanced epistemological appraisal. Tonkin's (2009) critique demonstrates that oral traditions are deeply embedded within social action frameworks, meaning that historians must engage not only with what is said but why it is said, by whom, and within what context. This aligns with Ikuenobe's (2018) suggestion that oral knowledge reflects a form of epistemic dependence, shaped by cultural, social, and power relations that influence both content and transmission dynamics. This reappraisal requires us to move beyond binary evaluations—where oral traditions are either accepted wholesale or dismissed as unreliable—and toward a multi-layered evaluation model. Such a model would consider (1) cognitive strategies and mnemonic devices, (2) social and ritual contexts, (3) performance structures, and (4) mechanisms of external validation such as archaeological and linguistic evidence. Only through such integrative frameworks can oral traditions be fully understood as epistemic systems of historical transmission rather than as mere narrative artifacts.

5.4 Implications for Africanist Historiography and Beyond

The African context strikingly illustrates the stakes of this reconceptualization. African societies have historically relied on oral tradition as the primary means of preserving their past, particularly in the absence of indigenous writing systems recognized by Western historiography. Scholars like Falola (2022) discuss how oral traditions are woven into ritual archives and indigenous knowledge systems, arguing

for their essential role in reconstructing historical experiences that colonial archives have often erased or distorted. Importantly, this epistemological reframing has decolonizing implications. By acknowledging oral traditions as legitimate historical sources, scholars challenge a colonial bias that equates literate modes of documentation with epistemic superiority. Recognizing oral narratives on their own terms not only enriches historical understanding but also honors the knowledge systems of preliterate societies, restoring agency to communities whose histories have been mediated through external archives.

5.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this doctrinal review integrates multiple disciplinary perspectives, it is limited by its dependency on existing literature rather than primary oral collection. Future empirical research could involve field-based oral documentation, particularly comparative studies across cultures with varying degrees of literate tradition. Additionally, there is a need for methodological innovations that integrate oral data with digital humanities tools such as computational text analysis to map narrative structures and memory patterns at scale. Another future trajectory lies in interdisciplinary collaborations between historians, cognitive scientists, and anthropologists to deepen understanding of how oral memory operates neurologically and culturally. Such work could further dismantle traditional dichotomies between written and oral epistemologies by revealing shared cognitive foundations of memory and narrative across modalities.

5.6 Conclusion

This study has critically examined oral traditions as vehicles of historical knowledge transmission, demonstrating that they constitute structured, adaptive, and epistemically credible systems. Through thematic synthesis of foundational theory and contemporary empirical studies, the analysis has identified oral traditions as cognitive and social frameworks that preserve historical consciousness across generations. Far from being relics or mere folklore, oral narratives function as systematic repositories of history, capable of yielding deep insights when subjected to rigorous methodological scrutiny. The reconceptualization of oral traditions challenges historians to adopt critical, context-sensitive approaches that honor the

complexity of narrative memory while interrogating its social mediation. In doing so, this study contributes to a broader historiographical discourse that privileges neither written nor oral sources uncritically but evaluates each based on its own internal structures, social functions, and epistemic mechanisms. Ultimately, recognizing the epistemic value of oral traditions enriches global historiography, validates diverse knowledge systems, and undermines arbitrary hierarchies that have long skewed historical interpretation in favor of literate documentation. Oral traditions, once relegated to the margins of academic history, emerge through this critical analysis as vital, rigorous, and indispensable sources of human knowledge about the past.

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