

AUTHOR:

Matteo Grilli¹

AFFILIATION:

¹ Senior Researcher,
International Studies Group,
University of the Free
State; Editor-in-Chief of
the *Southern Journal for
Contemporary History*

EMAIL:

grillim@ufs.ac.za

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EDITORIAL

Oral sources play a fundamental role in the study of African history. Their use by historians in the form of “oral traditions” has been first defined theoretically and methodologically by Jan Vansina, who is still the main reference in this field.¹ While Vansina himself had stated clearly that his approach was not “limited to any particular period or place”², oral traditions have been primarily deployed to investigate pre-colonial African history, when written documents produced by Africans were, in some societies, rare or totally absent.³

In the study of contemporary history⁴, “oral tradition” gives way to “oral history” based on oral testimonies.⁵ Stephen Ellis defines formal

1 J Vansina, *Oral tradition: A study in historical methodology*, translated by HM Wright, original ed. 1961 (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1965); J Vansina, “Once upon a time: Oral traditions as history in Africa”, *Daedalus* 100 (2), 1971, pp. 442-468; J Vansina, *Oral tradition as history* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Barbara M. Cooper provides a short definition of “oral traditions”. They “are generally stories about the past that local populations produce and reproduce through oral performative transmission, as a means of preserving their own history and consolidating or contesting a sense of belonging and identity”. In: BM Cooper, “Oral sources and the challenge of African history”. In: JE Philips (ed.) *Writing African history* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), p. 192. From criticisms of oral traditions as sources for history see Cooper, “Oral sources”, pp. 194-195.

2 Vansina, *Oral tradition as history*, p. xiii.

3 See for instance, D Henige, “Oral tradition as a means of reconstructing the past”. In: Philips (ed.) *Writing African history*, pp. 169-190.

4 On the journal’s definition of “contemporary history” and the problems that this definition entails, see, M Grilli, “Editorial”, *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* 46 (2), 2021, pp. 1-3.

5 David Henige defines “oral history” as, “the practice of eliciting life histories, personal reminiscences from participants in events of note or simply from everyday people whose views, it is thought, can provide a needed

interviews as “a source of major importance” for the study of contemporary African history.⁶ This is especially true for social phenomena, such as contemporary African migration, which are poorly served by written primary sources. Within this framework, scholars have to rely mostly on personal accounts to reconstruct life experiences which often fall off the radars of state bureaucracies and other record-producing institutions. This is exactly what the author of one of the articles of this issue, Júlio Machele, offers to the reader. In order to piece together the long history of Mozambican migration to South Africa and its impact on Mozambican society, interviews are essential, all the more so when the historian is trying to reconstruct the different perceptions of the migrants through the decades. As noted by Barbara Cooper, interviews are particularly apt at illuminating the, “unrecognised voices and experiences of the disadvantaged” like, as in the case of Machele’s work, migrants, workers and women.⁷

In Vansina’s understanding, songs and poems also fall under the broad rubric of oral traditions.⁸ The study of colonial and post-colonial African history has shown that these types of sources can be used successfully even for these periods.⁹ In his article, Júlio Machele employs songs and poems as sources to reconstruct the history of Mozambicans’ migrations to South Africa and the scars they left behind. Machele’s work, in sum, allows us to reflect on

antidote to an overly elitist perspective in most historiography. In this sense then, “oral history” scarcely deals with the past at all, but only with the length and breadth of the present generation”. In: D Henige, “Oral, but oral what? The nomenclatures of orality and their implications”, *Oral Tradition* 3 (1-2), 1988, p. 231; Henige clearly distinguishes “oral history” and “oral testimonies” from “oral traditions”. As for the latter, “to qualify for that sobriquet, materials should have been transmitted over several generations and to some extent be the common property of a group of people. [...] “testimony,” [...] by virtue of being the property of only a few individuals, seemed to me to lack the cachet (if sometimes dubious) that widespread belief and common acceptance grant to “oral tradition.” Henige, “Oral, but oral what?”, p. 232; See also D Henige, *Oral historiography* (London: Longman, 1982); On “oral history” in African history and its difference with “oral traditions” see also, Cooper, “Oral sources”, pp. 191-215.

6 S Ellis, “Writing histories of contemporary Africa”, *The Journal of African History* 43 (1), 2002, p. 22.

7 Cooper, “Oral sources”, p. 193.

8 Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*. For an example of the practical use of these sources see, for instance, EJ Alagoa, “Songs as historical data: examples from the Niger Delta”, *Research Review* 5 (1), 1968, pp. 1-16.

9 For classical studies which used this type of source, see, for instance, L Vail and L White, “Forms of Resistance: Songs and Perceptions of Power in Colonial Mozambique”, *The American Historical Review* 88 (4), 1983, pp. 883- 919; L Vail and L White, *Power and the praise poem: Southern African voices in history* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991). For a more recent example see FD Gunderson, *Sukuma labor songs from Western Tanzania: We never sleep, we dream of farming* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

the importance of sources which are often overlooked by historians but which, in fact, can serve to take, “the temperature of [...] societies”.¹⁰

This issue of the *Southern Journal for Contemporary History* also includes an interesting article authored by Frank Gerits and entitled “Anticolonial Capitalism: How Ghana came to embrace market-led development theory (1970s-1990s)”. Gerits’ contribution perfectly encapsulates one of the core objectives of this journal, that is, offering a platform to discuss theoretical issues concerning the Global South and Africa’s position within it. By employing the case of Rawlings’ Ghana, Gerits challenges the widely held view that sees African countries as only passive recipients of campaigns of economic liberalization and austerity devised in the Global North since the late 1970s. In reality, Gerits shows, “African economists, sociologists and politicians [...] co-wrote neoliberal development theory, co-created an anticolonial definition of capitalism and shaped Ghanaian diplomacy which sought to create a different kind of economic order”. This complicates the narrative of the historical shift from the state-driven modernisation theory and then the Marxist-led dependency theory to the neoliberal market society between the late 1970s and the 1990s in Ghana and Africa as a whole.

10 Ellis, “Writing histories”, p. 23; Ellis refers to African novelists here, but I think the same remarks also apply to singers and poets.