

Constructing The Bakossi-Bakundu Common Lineage: Is Oral Tradition A Subjective Historical Source?

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Abstract:

The writing of history in Cameroon began with the advent of western education and the development of literacy. Like in most other pre-literate societies historical reconstruction relied heavily on the memory of men. Oral tradition has therefore been hailed as the panacea to the Eurocentric problem of pre-European African historical emptiness. However, using oral tradition to historicise the origin and migration of certain communities has left conflicting positions which impinge on the trustworthiness of such accounts and of oral traditions as a credible historical source. We use the conflicting oral accounts of the Bakossi-Bakundu common lineage to demonstrate a weakness of oral tradition as a reliable historical source.

Key Words: *Oral Tradition, Historical reconstruction, subjectivity*

Introduction

Oral tradition constitutes a body of knowledge that demonstrates that African societies possess a wealth of historical experience worthy of preservation for posterity¹. In fact, a popular African proverb holds that ‘The mouth of an old man smells bad, but good and salutary things come out of it’. In the reconstruction of the African past, especially for the time before the

advent of writing in Africa, these old men and women have been referred to as ‘living encyclopedia’ or ‘moving libraries’ in recognition of the wealth of knowledge they possess and their ability to recount the past heritage of their communities for unending generations. They have contributed to the construction of portions of major historical pieces on Africa and are still doing so today. However, where two or three of such sources are consulted on the same issue there are often disparities in their accounts. These disparities become so wide in some areas that a single community has two divergent views on the

¹ Joseph, Ki-Zerbo, *General history of Africa 1: Methodology and African pre-history*. Paris: UNESCO, 1999, pp.60-1.

same topic that they begin to raise questions of the credibility of oral sources in the reconstruction of African history, especially, that of pre-colonial Africa.

A major context in which this is visible is in the oral traditions of origins and migrations of ethnic groups. In such accounts it is possible for one ethnic group to have more than two postulations of their origin, migratory roots and community leadership. Such conflicting accounts have been the source of misunderstandings within polities such as land occupancy, chieftaincy disputes and questions of inheritance. Within the domain of critical philosophy of history they also raise questions of trustworthiness of historical sources. The Bakossi and the Bakundu are ethnic groups in the South West region of Cameroon for which most oral traditions trace their origin from a mythical ancestor called Ngoe. Within the Bakossi, the origin of Ngoe is not unanimous. Also within the Bakundu, not all oral traditions acknowledge Ngoe as the mythical ancestor of the tribe. Even where they do, the oral traditions are so diverse that one begins to be skeptical in using such accounts as a source of historical construction. The paper is an eye opener to the fact that although hailed as a veritable source for historical reconstruction in Africa, the use of oral tradition must go with a strict implementation of all the tools of historical criticisms before being adopted as a credible historical knowledge.

Oral Tradition and the reconstruction of African History

In this paper, we present two dimensions of oral tradition; as a culture and as a process of transmission of that culture. Kanu has used the Latin noun *traditio* and verb *traderet* to distinguish these two². In the first dimension, oral tradition refers to the material and immaterial culture of societies hitherto without a written tradition which are intentionally held in the memory of the people. It includes the history of a people; their belief systems, socio-economic life, folklore, myths and legends, proverbs, ballads, songs, or chants. These aspects of culture have been part and parcel of communities and people since their beginning of consciousness³. The most significant thing with this meaning of oral tradition is that it is knowledge held in the memory of the people and can be accessed by calling upon an entrusted person to deliver it to an audience or an interested person when the need arises.

The fact of transmission brings us to the second meaning of oral tradition; what Kanu has called *trudere*. What contemporary generations know about most pre-literate people has been transmitted from generation to generation. Oral tradition in this case is the mode or method by which the knowledge of the past is transmitted,

²Yatta, Kanu, Tradition and educational reconstruction in Africa in postcolonial and global times: the case of Sierra Leone. *African Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3. 2008, p.68.

³ Joseph, Ki-Zerbo, *General History of Africa*, 1999, p.54.

reconstructed or re-appropriated⁴. This has often been through carefully worded speech, songs, poems and today, questions and answers. For the historian, they are historical accounts. The fact of transmission is very essential and is always emphasized for two reasons. First, contrary to some modernist Eurocentric conceptions of what constitutes history, it is possible for a society to transmit its history, literature and other knowledges across generations without a writing system. This is because the absence of a writing system in most communities before the 18th century has been used to deny most of these societies their being a historical part of the world.

Second, it implies that the tellers of the tales (oral historians, to distinguish them from literate historians) incorporate in their narratives at least some elements they have heard from someone else. These elements must have been transmitted only by word of mouth. The series of such transmissions establishes a 'chain of transmission' down through time that links elements of the testimony heard by the literate historian to the remote period of an initial eyewitness to be reconstructed. The chain of transmission thus forms the essential tie between the historian's present and a past, permitting the use of the transmitted elements as historical evidence. It is for this fact of transmission that Miller defines oral tradition as a narrative describing, or

purporting to describe, eras before the time of the person who relates it⁵.

There is substantial literature on the role of oral tradition in historical reconstruction and the development of the pre-colonial history of African societies. Several studies hail the efficacy of oral tradition in pre-colonial historical reconstruction⁶. Even in the context of European history a significant number of authors have highlighted the role of oral tradition as a credible type and source of history⁷.

African and Africanist historians have therefore embraced the narrative level of the traditions as valid evidence from and about the past, taking care only to reconstruct the proper wording through analysis of the chain of transmission from a presumed original telling down through the various versions of its extant in the present. Some of the better told and more worthy experiences pass-on as extended recollections into a second or even a third lifetime. Such passing-on generates a common or generally agreed upon explanation as

⁵ J.C., Miller, J.C. *The African past speaks: Essays on oral tradition and history*. Hamden, Connecticut: Dawson & Sons, 1980, p.2

⁶See for example Conrad, D.C., "Oral tradition and perceptions of history from the Manding peoples of West Africa" in Akyeampong, E.K., *Themes in West Africa's history*. Oxford: James Currey, 2006, pp.73-95; Miller, J.C., *The African past speaks: Essays on oral tradition and history*. Hamden, Connecticut: Dawson & Sons. 1980; S.J. Rasmussen, "Reflections on Myth and History: The Tuareg concepts of Truth, "lies" and "Children's Tales. In *Oral Tradition*, 13(2)1998, pp.247-284; J., Vansina, *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology*. Chicago: Aldine. 1965.

⁷ D.R., Woolf, D.R. "The Common Voice: History, folklore and oral tradition in early modern Britain" in *Past and Present*, 120, 1988, pp.26.

⁴ Jan, Vansina, *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology*. Chicago: Aldine. 1965, p.19

soon as its significance is recognized. Transformation of the narrative would continue and as time passes the concrete details composing the event would yield to the force of collective memory and the oral historians would begin stressing the explanatory aspect of their narratives and after about three hundred years they become structured narratives called oral traditions⁸.

The Oral traditions of Bakossi and Bakundu Origins and Migrations

The Bakossi constitute one of the major Bantu ethnic groups in Cameroon. The Germans were the first to study the Bantu people of Cameroon and divided them into two groups; the Maka group and the Duala group. The Duala group was further divided into the Bakundu and the Bakoko sub-groups. While the Bakundu group is associated with a north to south migration, the Bakoko are associated with a south to north migration⁹. The Bakossi are a member of the Bakundu subgroup located on the immediate slopes of the Manenguba and Kupe Mountains and almost completely occupy the present day Kupe-Manenguba Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. The Bakundu on their part are divided into Northern Bakundu in the North Western part of Meme Division of the South West Region and Southern Bakundu in the Southern

part of the same division interspersed by the Bafaw ethnic group¹⁰.

Map necessary here

Bakossi oral tradition amongst the various clans in the ethnic group agrees that the founder of the Bakossi is and Eponymous ancestor called Ngoe whose origin is popularly traced to the area around the Manenguba Mountain in the vicinities of Bangem, the capital of the Kupe-Manenguba Division¹¹. It is very interesting how each Bakossi clan narrates the story of its origin and migration from Ngoe. From these accounts we have been able to decipher five incongruences which constitute the contents of a larger study; first on the origin of Ngoe; second, on how Ngoe got his wife; third; on the number of children that Ngoe had; fourth, on the pride of place of first son and consequently the most senior Bakossi clan; fifth, on the common lineage with other ethnic groups.

Although these incongruences exist in the different accounts of the Ngoe legend among the Bakossi, one thing stands out clear that, all the accounts remain unanimous on the founder and the Ngoe story has been very significant in establishing a cultural bond amongst all the people who descend from him and for the propagation of peace and friendly relations. The ancestor's life is said to have begun on Mount Manenguba and ended in Mwekan village in Western Nninong (one

⁸ Vansina, Oral traditions, p.20

⁹ S. N., Ejedepang-Koge, *Bakossi: The Tradition of a people*, Yaoundé: SOPECAM, 1971, p22.

¹⁰ J.B. Ebune, *The Bakundu of Cameroon Yesterday and Today*, Kansas City: Miraclaire Academic Publishers, 2014, p.22

¹¹ H., Balz, *Where the faith has to live: Studies in Bakossi society and religion Part I; Living together*. Basel: Basel Mission Archive and Library, 1984, p.43

of the Bakossi clans) where he died¹². It is from Mwekan that his children began to migrate and establish other Bakossi clans as well as different ethnic groups such as the Bassossi, Balong, Bafaw and Bakundu¹³. In this paper we focus on the Bakossi-Bakundu common lineage as recounted by Bakossi Oral tradition and then turn to Bakundu Oral tradition to ascertain the link.

As mentioned above, there are sharp disputes amongst the various Bakossi oral traditions regarding the number of children that Ngoe had. The controversy has been sustained till date¹⁴. Some oral traditions hold that Ngoe had seven children, some say nine, others, twelve and still others talk of many¹⁵. Even comparing the oral traditions from earlier and later British colonial intelligent reports, the confusion is very obvious¹⁶. Ejedepang finally consoles readers by observing that since the tradition has been widely held and recounted, Ngoe may have had many sons. Or it may be that these seven were the first sons, and being the most elderly ones, may have been able to set an imprint of their personality in the minds of their brethren by acts of courage, valour, leadership, and intelligence in one way or the other. Thus only these seven sons became

popularly known. But as to who was the first, of Ngoe, we find difficulty in drawing conclusions¹⁷.

What is however important here, is the relationship or common ancestry that Bakossi Oral tradition seem to establish between the Bakossi, Mbo, Bakundu, Bafaw and Balong ethnic groups. According to Nzo Ekha-Nghaki¹⁸, Ngoe had seven sons who are today said to be the founding fathers of Bakossi clans and the other ethnic groups hitherto mentioned. These are Anongoe (Nninong); Mbongoe (Mwambong); Ngelengoe (Muangel); Menamengoe (Mwamenam); Mukundangoe (Bakundu); Asomengoe (Southern Bakossi) and Nino (Nkongsamba). According to this version of Bakossi Oral tradition, Ngoe's son Mukundangoe is said to be the ancestor of the Bakundu ethnic group. This is confirmed by the oral tradition of B.E.N. Metuge¹⁹. Although they do not agree with NzohEkanghaky's number and names of children and direct descendants of Ngoe, they however support the fact that one of Ngoe's children was Mukundangoe the founder of the Bakundu ethnic group. Even Carl Epienkwele²⁰, the late chief of Mwanbong, (another Bakossi clan), holds firm to the fact that the Bakundu are of a common lineage with the Bakossi through Mukundangoe. Chief Mesumbe

¹² Ibid, 1984, p.44

¹³ S.N., Ejedepang-Koge, pp.33-5

¹⁴ H., Balz, *Where the faith lives*. p.54

¹⁵ S.N., EjedepangKoge, 1971, p.25 has analysed these differences between the Mwambong, Nninong and Asomengoe versions of the Bakossi oral traditions.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.22

¹⁷ Ibid. p.25

¹⁸ N., Ekha-Nghaky, *The Legend of Ngeh*; founder of the Ngeh people (mimeograph) 1964,

¹⁹ B.E. Metuge, *The Elung Version of the History of Bakossi, Bafaw and Balong*, Lagos: Lagos Press, 1954, also cited in Ejedepang, 1971, p.25

²⁰ Interviewed by S.N. ejedepang on August 1, 1967

of Bangem and A.E. Mukwelle²¹ of the same village also support this fact. Thus, amongst the Bakossi as a whole there is a popular saying that 'Bakossi and Bakundu na one'.

From these oral traditions, the migratory route of the Bakundu is confidently traced by Ejedepang-Kogefrom Ngoe'sMwekan abode wherethey began to migrate southwards²². On this Southwards march they met with the Bafaw and the Balong who happened to constitute an earlier wave of migrants from the same place of origin in Mwekan-Bakossi. They proceeded calmly but did not hesitate to clash with the Bakossi during their push of the Bafaw west. Such clashes are said to have occurred around Nongo-Madiba and east of Konye, but with little loss, for as soon as passage was allowed them all trouble was over. They continued westwards on crossing the Mungo headwaters, establishing such Bakundu villages as Old Wone, further west to present day Wone, Supe, Ibemi, Itoki among others, all fairly protected naturally from attack²³.

According to Ejedepang, Supe village was founded in a large valley with access only through the south and north by-passes. The east passage could only be done over the Mungo headwaters which, is still very difficult today, especially during the rainy season. This settlement as well as the village of Ibemi which was founded at the foot of the Rumpi Mountain, and hemmed in by large

streams crossed only with difficulty was established as a function of defense²⁴. Ejedepang-Koge's account continues that the Bakundu migratory march continued westwardsafter the establishment of the initial villages. A split occurred and a faction which was fearful of the difficult terrain chose a southwards route where they had to pass through the Bafaw land²⁵.

The passage is said to have been allowed by the Bafaw only on condition that no settlement would be undertaken for any reason. In this way the Bakundu were able to continue their march south and west. They met with the Balong but not much trouble occurred, and with the Balondo with whom no major difficulty is traced either²⁶. The split of the Bakundu after the establishment of the initial villages and the southward migration of a faction which crossed the Bafaw, has today given rise to two Bakundu territories; the northern Bakundu which settled around the initial villages ofIbemi, Wone and Supe and a Southern Bakundu which crossed the Bafaw and founded villages such as Boa-Bakundu, Kombone, Bole and Foe²⁷.

Despite this detailed account of the Bakundu southwards migration, it is said that Ejedepang-Koge had followed up the oral tradition of Ngoe'sdescendants beyond Bakossi only in a very narrow sense²⁸. Although he visited

²⁴ Ibid. p.48

²⁵ Ibid. p.49

²⁶ Ibid. p.49

²⁷ Ibid. p.49; J. Ebune, *The Bakundu Yesterday and Today*, 2014 has presented maps showing this partitioning of the Bakundu in pages 24 and 26.

²⁸ H. Balz, *Where the faith lives*, 1984, pp. 73-4

²¹ Interviewed by S.N., Ejedepang 29-31 July 1967 in Bangem and Nninong

²² S.N. Ejedepang-Koge, *The tradition of a people*, p.48-9

²³ Ibid. p.48

Tombel, Bangem and Nguti subdivisions (all inhabited by Bakossi), he did not travel or carry out interviews amongst the other ethnic groups which he claims, have a common ancestry with the Bakossi such as the Bakundu²⁹. He has therefore predominantly relied on Bakossi oral tradition to establish the link between the Bakossi, Bakundu, Bafaw, Mbo and Balong ethnic groups. That is why some historians believe that the links of these ethnic groups to the ancestor Ngoe are only perpetuated by Bakossi oral tradition as documented by Ejedepang-Koge. That is why Balz has termed this account the Ejedepang Model³⁰. Even amongst the Bakossi, the acknowledged speakers of oral tradition who are not of the Ejedepang-Koge clan (Asomengoe) observe that 'while his book appears quite reliable and complete for the history of the Southern Bakossi (the Asomengoe), it still leaves many things unwritten from the point of view of the northern sons of Ngoe, and they would want to see a number of points corrected as well'³¹

It is therefore relevant to present the position that the Bakundu themselves hold about the whole story of their origin and migration, both to confirm and correct what has been told amongst the Bakossi. Amongst the Bakundu, (108) oral traditions are also very complicated and hardly

unanimous³². Regina Mosume and Zakaria Ekori Ekali³³ all veteran teachers of Marumba Bowa (a Bakundu Village) in recounting the origin and migration of their village claim that the Bakundu are descendants of an ancestor called Owase meaning God, who originally lived in the Congo or Gabon³⁴. From there the migratory route is associated with the Duala and Bakweri (although this may not be accepted in the oral traditions of Bakweri and Duala). Somehow, according to Ekali's account, the Bakundu ancestor found himself in Beboka in Ndian Division from where he began an eastwards and northwards migration which saw some arrive at Supe³⁵ (mentioned by Ejedepang's account as one of the areas settled by the Northern Bakundu who migrated southwards from Bakossi).

Ekali's model of Bakundu origin and migration seems to be confirmed in part by the prominent Bakundu historian Joseph Ebune. According to Ebune Bakundu Oral tradition states that, the founding father of Bakundu was called Ngoe who had two sons, Mauma and Mukundu at a place (the Bakundu ancestral home) called Beboka in present day Ndian Division³⁶. He however holds that the Bakundu Ngoe may have been different

³²Balz 1984, p.104 has made reference to some early accounts of Bakundu such as seen by Valentin P., 'Jujus in the Forest areas of Cameroon', 1980 (Essay) Basel Mission Archives and Ngoeh, T.S., 'The Male Society in Bakundu' 1972 which present different accounts of Bakundu Origins and Migrations.

³³ Interviewed by A.N. Bokowe in August 2011 at Marumba-Bowa

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ J.B. Ebune, *The Bakundu of Cameroon*, 2014, p.23, 27, 28.

²⁹ Ibid. p.74

³⁰ Ibid. p.61

³¹ This is the opinion of Mr. Elias Edientongwe of Epenebel (Bakossi). He was interviewed by Ejedepang-Koge in July-August 1967 but this revelation was made in an interview with H. Balz on April 4, 1982 probably after reading Ejedepang-Koge's book.

from that of the Bakossi³⁷. From Bekoka, Ngoe's sons; Mauma and Mukundu are said to have had a dispute over farmland and separated. Mukundu's children came to be known as Bakundu and those from Mauma were called Bauma and Bima now found in the present day Ndian Division³⁸ probably after migrating south-westwards. Regarding the migration of the Bakundu from Beboka, Ebune reports that they began to move northeastwards founding a new settlement at Iyombo, north of Kita-Balue³⁹.

At Iyombo, the Bakundu quarreled with the Balue, Mbonge and Balundu peoples over hunting grounds and farmland. The quarrels forced them to leave Iyombo. The migration from Iyombo brought about the dispersal of the Bakundu in different directions. Some families moved northwards where villages like Konye, Ndoi, Supe, Wone, Ibemi and Itoki were founded. Those who travelled southwards founded villages such as Boa, Bole, Foe, Kombone, Ngongo, Marumba, Pete etc. further Southeastward migrations of the Bakundu saw the establishment of the Banga, Bombe, Mbonji and Ediki villages⁴⁰.

While this model of the Bakundu origin and migration suggests a south to north pattern there are other oral traditions amongst the Bakundu which claim a north to south migration similar to Ejedepang-Koge's model. Amongst the most easterly Bakundu of Ediki, Mbonji and Bombe,

popular narratives trace their origin from the north and probably from the Bakossi. In a historical account of the Ediki-Bakundu and Mbalangi, Chief Joseph Mosango of Ediki-Bakundi⁴¹ claims that the original inhabitants of the area are the Bakundu whose migrations have been traced from the Mungo River which runs north easterly from the present settlement. According to the chief, their first settlement seems to be from beyond this river⁴².

Ejedepang-Koge's model of the Bakundu migration mentions their having crossed the headwaters of the Mungo River before founding the first villages of Ibemi and Old-Wone⁴³. It is from here that the people moved southwestwards reaching the present day Ediki and then as a result of the search for better land began to disperse towards present day Mbalangi⁴⁴. A.K. Mosongo, a Bakundu elite and director of the Linguistic Centre Buea strongly believes in this north-south migration of the Bakundu from Bakossi. In a keynote address during the 1987 congress of the Bakundu cultural and Development Association, he reiterated that 'for my almost half a century in this world...and from my primary school days, I have always been told and I am convinced that we (Bakundu) are kinsmen to the Bakossi'⁴⁵.

This position is also exhibited in Ebune's account of Bakundu history. He writes that 'the oral

⁴¹ Interviewed by N.N. Nicobi on September 10, 2013

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ S.N. Ejedepang-Koge, p.49

⁴⁴ Chief Joseph Mosango of Ediki interviewed by N.N. Nicobi, September 2013

⁴⁵ Quoted in J.B. Ebune, 2014, p.30

³⁷ Ibid. p.23, 28

³⁸ Ibid.p.23

³⁹ Ibid. p.25

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.25

traditions of the origins of the Bakundu, Bafaw, Bakossi, Balong and other ethnic groups like the Bassossi and Mbonge have one thing in common; an eponymous ancestor variously known as Ngoe, Ngoeh or Ngo⁴⁶. Although he had earlier acknowledged that the Ngoe of Bakundu may be different from that of the Bakossi, Ebune in page 27 writes that ‘another ethnic group which shares the same ancestor with the Bakundu is Bafaw whom he claims rather originate from Masui in the Mbo plain from where they migrated southwards. In page 29 Ebune continues that all the people Balong, Bafaw, Bakossi and Bakundu are Bantu all of whom Edwin Arderner has classified as belonging to the northwesterly branch of the Bantu-speaking people all of whom are seen to have exhibited a north to south migratory trend.

From the above discussion, it is evident that oral tradition amongst the Bakundu is far from being unanimous regarding their ancestry. While one shed of opinion suggests a common ancestry with the Bakossi, the other shed betrays the common lineage. Even amongst the Bakossi, some oral traditions hold that there was no child named Mokundango the Bakundu ancestor who migrated south⁴⁷. These divergences in oral traditions have affected the documentation of the history of many indigenous communities in Cameroon. Amongst the Bakundu, while there is no mention of the

name Ngoe in Ekali and Mosume’s accounts, Ebune’s reference to Ngoe may somehow have suggested a link to the Bakossi ancestor as the Ediki-Bakundu claim.

Amongst the Bakossi, Balz has talked of ‘doubtful cases of oral tradition’⁴⁸. If the Bakundu premise of Beboka as their ancestral home should hold, who then was the Bakossi ancestor called Mukundango whom the Bakossi claim was the ancestor of the Bakundu? If the Mukundango legend is to be believed, what then do we make of Beboka, which is claimed to be the ancestral land of Bakundu? In view of all these, and by virtue of the fact that what we represent as history should be as near as possible the exactitude of what happened in the past, it is therefore necessary to question the credibility or ability of oral tradition to fulfill this criteria of history.

By claiming a north to south migration of the Bakundu, it is possible to insinuate that Mukundango was in deed the founder of the Bakundu who migrated from the Bakossi. By claiming the origin of the Bakundu at Beboka, Bakossi oral tradition of Ngoe’s son called Mokundango becomes a non-event. It is worth mentioning that studies on the migratory patterns of the Duala Bantu have identified two patterns; the south to north pattern of migration amongst the Bakoko subgroup and a north to south pattern amongst the Bakundu subgroup within which the

⁴⁶ J.B. Ebune, 2014, p.23, 27

⁴⁷ See for instance S.N. Ejedepang-Koge, p.25, 35 and 48 for a discussion and genealogical tree of Ngoe’s descendants as presented by the different Bakossi clans.

⁴⁸ H. Balz, 1984, p. 11

Bakossi belong⁴⁹. The oral traditions which trace the Bakundu origin at Beboka seem to place the Bakundu in the Bakoko group whereas those which acknowledge a north to south trend place them in the Bakundu group and suggest a possible Bakossi lineage. The fact that they are said to be speaking the *lokundu, lundu or kundu or Bakundu* language suggest strongly that they may be of a common heritage with all others in the Bakundu group such as the Bakossi and Bafaw⁵⁰ who are placed in this same linguistic group.

Oral tradition as a tool for historical reconstruction: Relevance and challenges

The relevance of oral tradition in African historical reconstruction cannot be over-emphasized when we understand that the Eurocentric perspectives on the African past had denied them the existence of any history before European contact. A Chinese saying for example claimed that 'the palest ink is to be preferred to the strongest word'⁵¹. It is often said that where there is no penman to record the memorable acts and passages of time, the memory of them is swallowed up in the gulf of oblivion⁵². This led African intellectuals to call for a re-appropriation of pre-colonial forms of knowing to rediscover the roots of African identity and those traditional

values which were to be very significant for the development of an indigenous history. In civilizations that did not know writing, speech, as a vector of messages essential to the life of the group, took on a special significance that was lost to societies endowed with a written language⁵³. 'Everything vital to the proper working of a society transmitted by means of written documents in societies with writing was transmitted by means of tradition in oral societies'⁵⁴.

Even in the west where reading and writing had existed for many centuries past, the early modern antiquities relied to a great extent not only on manuscript and archaeological material, but also on a variety of oral sources ranging from popular recollections of the aged⁵⁵. They may be in declining status today as a source of historical writing due to a number of contemporary developments but, the subject of oral traditions still attracts the attention of historians working not only in areas where the spoken culture predominated but where writing has been a long standing aspect of civilization.

However, the inability for oral traditions to hold a common position regarding communal issues such as origin and migration as we have seen in the accounts of Bakossi-Bakundu common lineage brings to focus its credibility in serving as a reliable historical source. This problem (of

⁴⁹ A. Neba, *Modern Geography of the Republic of Cameroon (3rd Ed)*, Bamenda: Neba Publishers, 1999, p.69; V.J. Ngoh, *Cameroon 1884-1985: A Hundred Years of History*, Limbe: Navy Group; SN. Ejedepang-Koge, p.24; Balz, 1984, p.43

⁵⁰ A. Neba, 1999, p.69; J.B., Ebune, 2014, p.22

⁵¹ D.R. Woolf, 'The Common Voice', 1988, p.26.

⁵² Ibid, p.26

⁵³ J. Ki-Zerbo, 1990, p.56

⁵⁴ Ibid. p.26

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.2

variation) has been the single most criticized aspect of oral tradition. Variation refers to the differences nearly always encountered when literate historians identify the multiple accounts present in the historical corpus of an oral society. It has afforded critics the opportunity to cite such differences as support for their doubts that the traditions could be historical.

Historians who have retained their faith in the capacity of oral traditions to convey literal descriptions of the past have attempted without success to dismiss variation as a result of faulty transmission. They have argued that, the creativity with which oral narrators construct their tales about the past suggests rather that variation in detail is more a result of positive value placed upon individual elaboration of historical clichés than the failure in the handing down of some literal description of events⁵⁶. This position is hardly convincing and the varied accounts of Bakundu migration presented above are seen more in terms of incongruences which in themselves, cannot be seen as a positive value.

Among the Bakossi and Bakundu, there is always one 'true' version of oral tradition in which the tellers own clan has a prominent if not even the first position, and dismisses all other versions as being biased or twisted⁵⁷. For example, Ejedepang-Koge in 1971 took the trouble to collect a number of different lists of sons of Ngoe

and to comment critically about their contradictions. He admits that the number of Ngoe's real sons- seven, nine, twelve or many, is not sacrosanct, but he too is concerned to establish that Asomengoe, the father of the five southern clans, to whom as a man of Mwasundem clan he himself belongs, must have been the first son. Among the Nninong, it is not accepted that Asomengoe is the first son. The Nninong even do not even recognize the existence of Kaangoe as one of the sons of Ngoe who founded the Elung clan. This is not unconnected to the fact that the two had been at war since the early days. This is what Levin, the first outsider to critically go into the genealogies of Ngoe, has termed 'the political manipulation of genealogies'⁵⁸. According to Levin, the very existence of so many divergent 'true' versions puts to question the credibility of oral tradition as a historical source as they leave the historian/researcher even more confused.

In the accounts of the Bakundu origin and migration above, Ebune mentions that the Bakundu are descendants of Ngoe just like the Bakossi and Bafaw and Balong⁵⁹. But to justify their origin from Beboka as some of his sources asserted, Ebune warns that the Ngoe of Bakossi may have been different from that of the Bakundu⁶⁰. This may have sounded convincing considering the different ancestral lands and the

⁵⁶ Miller, 1980, p. 261; Ki-Zerbo, 1990, p.64

⁵⁷Balz, 1984, p.54 experienced this fact in his interviews amongst the various Bakossi clans in the early 1880s

⁵⁸Levin, M.D. 'Family Structure in Bakossi: Social Change in an African Society'. PhD Dissertation in Sociology, Princeton University, 1976, Pp. 22-25

⁵⁹Ebune, 2014, p23, 28

⁶⁰ J.B. Ebune, pp.23,28

south to north migratory routes which he has advocated in the same study. But the coincidence of two ethnic groups being founded by two ancestors at different places with the same name does not seem to be evident. Besides, the fact that after acknowledging the Beboka origin of the Bakundu and the south to north migration, Ebune continues to talk of a possible common Bakundu origin with the Bakossi, Bafaw and Balong who are known to have exhibited a north to south migration demonstrates the extent to which oral tradition has been a point of controversy and a trustworthy historical source. In fact the confusion brought by oral tradition has left Ebune to conclude that 'it is not clear regarding the origin of the Bakundu'⁶¹.

The issue of incongruence in oral traditions is further compounded by the absence of dates in most of the accounts. In view of this, and in the context of one of the qualities of history dealing with exact or approximations of historical time, one is bound to express worries whether the oral traditions of the Bakossi and Bakundu can actually be regarded as history because there are hardly any dates given in any of the accounts that we have consulted. Balz explains that 'among the Bakossi, if one presses the tellers of the story on this point, some say Ngoe lived thousands of years ago, whereas others say hundreds of years ago'⁶². The absence of dates has made it difficult for the generations of Ngoe, Bakossi and even the

Bakundu up to the present time to be counted. It is only the important fore-fathers that are remembered in story-telling or in praying to the ancestors.

In most communities where oral tradition was predominant, there was always a distinction between oral traditional historians whose function it was to teach the histories of their polities in a way that stimulates their listeners when the need arose and minstrels and house captives whose main function was to entertain with stories of imagination and folklore and who accordingly had the right to misrepresent the truth and invent lies⁶³. In each of the cases, the latter were allowed to have two tongues and the public was warned not to confuse the two. In most of such societies, the two versions of oral tradition survived and if care was not taken, they became mixed up along the way to the point that what present generations know as the oral traditions of their polities are a blend of tainted and spiced stories of entertainment and what was supposed to be the real history of the people⁶⁴.

Other issues which continue to work against the use of oral tradition include the amount of oral data that the oral historian often has to deal with and problems associated with memory. Kanar's definition of memory as a process by which the

⁶³ Conrad 2006, pp.73-95 has discussed this issue among the Manding of west Africa extensively

⁶⁴ S.J., Rasmussen, 1998, has discussed this in her study of Myth and History amongst the Tuaregs of northern Niger

⁶¹ Ibid, p.31

⁶² H. Balz, 1984, 43

mind receives information and either discards it or stores it for later use⁶⁵ is very appropriate for our understanding of its function in an erstwhile oral society. To her an active memory undertakes three processes; reception of information by hearing from somebody or being an eyewitness; retention of information and recollection of information⁶⁶. In this process some information is often omitted and items that were not even observed may be added. That is why even advocates of oral traditions do not deny the fact that the memorizing of perceptual data may also be strongly coloured by emotion in such a way that the displeasing perceptions are ignored or suppressed. Experiences have shown this to be true when opinions contrary to one's own are to be learned. This also brings in the issue of Oral tradition and objectivity in the reconstruction of History.

Conclusion

The paper aimed at examining how oral traditions were used to reconstruct the Bakossi-Bakundu common lineage. It shows that the reconstruction of history through oral traditions has brought forth divergent and sometimes contradictory versions of the origin and migration of the Bakossi and Bakundu. It has also shown that as a result of these divergence, it is difficult to ascertain the existence of a Bakossi-Bakundu common lineage. However, despite the weaknesses, historians have argued that, these weaknesses do not necessarily

mean that oral traditions are actually not credible. Ki-Zerbohas argued that the value of a tradition cannot be dismissed without proof that fault occurred or that the probability of its having occurred is very great⁶⁷. He explains that, it is not just sufficient to claim that an oral society automatically erases from its collective memory everything that is liable to be prejudicial to it.

⁶⁵ C.C. Kanar, *The Confident student*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1995, p.228

⁶⁶ Ibid. p.229

⁶⁷ Ki-Zerbo, 1990, p.56