Orality and Life Histories: Rethinking the Social and Political History of Senegal
Author(s): Babacar Fall
Reviewed work(s):
Published by: Indiana University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/4187572

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Africa Today.
Orality and Life Histories: Rethinking the Social and Political History of Senegal

Babacar Fall

Life histories and other oral sources are an essential element of African historiography and ought to be integrated into the history curriculum of African institutions. Seeking to reorient the teaching of African history, history professors at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Cheikh Anta Diop University (Dakar, Senegal) initiated an oral history project involving education students. Students collected life histories, which they later integrated into their lesson plans. Using the example of the 1947–48 railroad strike, the article points to the complex relationship between literary creation and collective memory.

Introduction

“For a long time, all kinds of myths and prejudices concealed the true history of Africa from the world at large. African societies were looked upon as societies that could have no history” (Mbow 1981:xvii). Today Africa is no longer denied a history, and African history has become a legitimate field of inquiry. African historiography however needs to continue to confront its construction as a historical discourse, which must “take apart a society in order to rediscover its ideals, values, and models for action” (Vansina 1981:154). Reconstructed through multiple approaches, historical discourse follows the ebb and flow of cultural evolution, and is marked by various influences. In Senegambia, this reconstruction includes African traditions, the heritage of Arabo-Islamic culture, and the imprint of European modernity. This triple heritage appears only rarely in the reconstruction of historical discourse, which, in most instances, relies on the elites or scholar-specialists molded by one of the aforementioned cultures. It is therefore a fragmented discourse, with each category of specialists speaking to its own audience. The “cohabitation” of knowledge held by the elites of each of the three categories makes it difficult for the postcolonial state to “impose a common historical identity on diverse societies who live their history in the longue durée” (Barry 2001:35).
This problematique is not likely to be resolved any time soon in Senegambian, let alone African, societies and will not be attempted here. The more modest goal of this article is to review the triple heritage of Senegambian societies with respect to oral tradition, show how the teaching of history in Senegalese schools can be made more relevant by incorporating oral sources into the curriculum, and discuss the Ecole Normale Supérieure (School of Education) oral history project at the University Cheikh Anta Diop (Dakar, Senegal) and some of the issues the project raised in relation to the 1947–1948 railroad strike.

**Oral tradition and historiography in Senegambia**

The Senegalese past has been reconstructed in histories written by university-trained professionals and preserved in collective memory by griots, who transmit stories of empires and kingdoms from generation to generation. These processes represent two types of discourse, which often display contradictory logic, for “the way in which history is written, thought, interpreted or read cannot be dissociated from the structures, forces and conflicts of the society which made that history” (Wamba-dia-Wamba 1992: 10).

Professional historians rely on research methods consisting of the collection, comparison, and critical study of sources, but griots—masters of the spoken word, guardians of oral traditions—go through an apprenticeship that confers on a particular group the capacity to engage mediation structures in a society whose members are marked by their status. As parallel discourses, which intersect occasionally or exist side by side in the people’s mental universe, historical texts and griots’ accounts constitute two modes of representing the collective memory. In the absence of writing, the preservation and transmission of knowledge by griots have been the earliest efforts in the quest for a collective memory.

In Senegambian societies, the spoken word preceded the written document. The griots recounted historical events long before professional historians began searching for traces of the past in written documents, oral traditions, changes in the landscape, and monuments erected by preceding generations. In his reflection on the historical discourses of oral tradition in Senegambia, Boubacar Barry notes that the dual role of the griot is to, “break the silence of forgetting and exalt the glory of tradition” (Barry 2001:5). For Cheikh Hamidou Kane the griots:

> By the magic of their voices and the instruments they invented, [griots] were the demiurges who shaped that world and made themselves its sole witnesses. They praised it and... kept it alive in glory and tradition. They accomplished this against silence and forgetting, and in spite of the destructive effect of time. Thus Farba Masi Seck, the griot of the Jallobe in the Fuuta Toro, knew the power of silence. (Kane 1996:7–8)
In the Mandinka epic of Soundjata, Djibril Tamsir Niane (1965) shows that the griots of Mali play the same role as the guardians of knowledge in Fuuta Toro society. Griot Mamadou Kouyaté explains:

Since time immemorial the Kouyatés have been in the service of the Keita princes of Mali; we are the vessels of speech, we are the repositories which harbour secrets many centuries old. The art of eloquence has no secrets for us; without us the names of kings would vanish into oblivion, we are the memory of mankind; by the spoken word we bring to life the deeds and exploits of kings for younger generations. . . . History holds no mystery for us; we teach to the vulgar just as much as we want to teach them, for it is we who keep the keys to the twelve doors of Mali. . . . My word is pure and free of all untruth; it is the word of my father; it is the word of my father’s father. I will give you my father’s words just as I received them; royal griots do not know what lying is. [quoted in Niane 1965:1]

With the shift from orality to writing, when literate Muslims began using the alphabet in Arabic, Pulaar, Wolof, and Mandinka, oral tradition in the Senegambia underwent a considerable evolution. The Tarikh Es Sudaan and the Tarikh El Fettach, the oldest chronicles that shed light on the history of the 15th- to 17th-century states of the Western Sudan, are the first transcriptions of traditions by Muslim scholars who were not griots by birth. With the Tarikhs began the coexistence of the griots and Muslim scholars, who stand out by their ability to write and interpret the history of Sudanese societies.

French colonial domination, especially during the time of Governor Louis Faidherbe (1854–1861 and 1863–1865), gave rise to Africanism, characterized by the collection of Arabic manuscripts or eyewitness accounts in French and aimed at nourishing a historical and literary production. Yet colonial history denied defeated peoples their own history, and introduced new values that enshrined the superiority of French civilization. Negating vanquished peoples’ pasts legitimated domination and made fashioning a new model of society possible. The birth of ethnography was characterized by an emphasis on data gathering and the transcription of documents that shed light on various aspects of Senegambian societies. Maurice Delafosse (1913), for example, established himself with the Chroniques du Fouta Senegalais. In 1935, Henri Gaden published La vie d’El Hadj Omar. These publications are translations of documents written by Muslim scholars who were relating the major events in the history of the Fuuta Toro. Senegalese like Yoro Diaw and Amadou Duguay Cléodor, who graduated from French schools, also gathered and transcribed oral traditions. Yoro Diaw first published his “Cahiers portant sur l’histoire des royaumes Wolof” in 1863. In 1912, they appeared under the title Légendes et Coutumes Sénégalaises,
with an introduction by Henri Gaden, who noted, “the knowledge of French Yoro acquired in the School of Hostages allowed him to take notes from his father’s narratives and, later on, those of the griots and elders he listened to. He prepared the two ‘Cahiers’ that follow on the basis of these notes with the goal of fixing these memories and without expecting that they would be published one day” (Gaden 1912:2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.). During the same year, the schoolteacher Amadou Duguay Cléodor wrote about Kajoor history in _La bataille de Guilé_ (1912) and distinguished himself as a herald of Senegalese nationalism.

As the colonial system was put in place, however, and archives were established, written documents increasingly took pride of place in the historical research of modern historians. “These historians privileged written sources and simply used oral traditions to correct or confirm information. For the most part, historians did not adequately analyze the internal logic of oral sources as an alternate historical discourse that would have been transmitted with the clear objective of speaking history” (Barry 2001:5–6).

The project of that history is embedded in a logic that constitutes a response to the metropole: revalorize the past and generate forces that can be thrown into the battle for national emancipation and development. The first generation of African historians was above all concerned with reconstituting, rehabilitating, and promoting recognition of the chronological depth of African history through long-term studies of kingdoms and precolonial societies. Such a task could be realized only with the support of oral, and especially written, sources.

Most Senegambian historical production has continued the tradition of articulating these two types of sources. Written history has remained in the conventional mold of privileging the use of oral materials collected as an appendage or as a complement to written sources or colonial archives. However, such an approach cannot bring about a rupture in the way local populations appropriate their own history.

Life histories and other oral sources provide another way of writing history and of according social actors a place in the process. Recognition of this fact prompted a group of Senegalese scholars to commit themselves to valorizing historical production by privileging the gathering of testimonies and life histories from the actors of ongoing history, as a way of enriching the writing of history about Senegambian societies. Like Bogumil Jewsiewicki, they view, “the life history [as] a historically bounded cultural product that takes the individual durée as a social fact constituted through the dynamic interaction of the individual dimension of the social with the social aspect of the individual” (1987:215). It is this approach that the Université Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar oral history laboratory is putting into practice. What follows retraces the context for the creation of an oral history archive and outlines one of the issues that arose in the course of oral history research on Senegambian societies.
The Teaching of History in Senegalese Schools

Oral traditions have been central to historical research in Africa for a long time: “modern historians learned in their universities to write history by checking written documents against oral sources” (Barry 2001:5). But history education has so far made little use of oral testimony as a pedagogical tool. As in most francophone African countries, the teaching of history in the Senegalese school system has relied on a uniform official history, codified in textbooks based largely on written sources. The history curricula in contemporary Senegalese schools claim to be objective and scientific. Drawing on Senghorian concepts, they aim to anchor students in their culture while encouraging them to be open to the wider world. Nevertheless, oral sources have sometimes been viewed with suspicion. In effect, in the process of decolonizing history, historians have often been all too eager to use the same tools as those that prevailed during colonial times. Yet in Africa, as elsewhere, knowledge of societies, institutions, and past and contemporary civilizations requires the mediation of oral sources as a fixture of the cultural landscape. Although oral tradition continues to profoundly shape the perception of history in popular culture, it appears to be taboo or little utilized in modern education. It is generally brought into the curriculum only when teachers use oral materials collected by themselves, whereas, for students, two conceptions of history coexist and perhaps even conflict with each other: the one instilled at home, and the official one conveyed in school.

The image that children have of themselves, of those close to them, and of their own and other societies, depends largely on the way history is taught. It is therefore useful to reconcile or better integrate traditional history, conveyed through oral sources, and official history, which is often written in foreign languages. Contradictions between these histories can be progressively eliminated by involving students in collecting oral testimonies, by familiarizing them with oral traditions, and by encouraging the exploration of historical events within their communities.

Collecting oral testimonies can teach young people about the history of their community and society, and by examining the discourse of social actors in relation to social realities, it can instill in them a sense of scientific inquiry. This pedagogy requires a closer link between research and the teaching of history. Education students need to be taught to collect oral histories from mature persons who have lived through significant events of the contemporary period. These reflections led the Department of History and Geography of the University Cheikh Anta Diop School of Education (UCAD-ENS) to develop an oral archive dedicated to the economic, social, and political history of Senegal, as discussed below. The initiative encourages education students to collect oral testimonies and accord local oral history a greater place in their teaching. In thus promoting a pedagogy of African history that privileges local history through the medium of oral
sources, a new approach to the teaching of history is gradually taking shape. Placing greater emphasis on African history has generated considerable interest in oral tradition; moreover, implementing this project signals a new focus on orality and an alternate interpretation, a potential rewriting, of the social, political, and even economic history of Senegambian societies.

The UCAD-ENS Oral History Project

Oral sources have so far received little pedagogical attention. The current overriding concern is to fill this lacuna and offer social scientists a source of information that brings together historical discourses and eyewitness accounts from social actors who have played important roles in recent history. The urgency of the situation provided the impetus for an initial effort to collect eyewitness accounts of a famous event, the railroad strike of 1947–1948. That initiative was expanded to include the social and political history of contemporary Senegambia more generally.

In August 1994, to promote a new approach to writing and teaching history, the Ecole Normale Supérieure of the University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar held a seminar-workshop on the methodology of data gathering and the preservation of oral accounts. The workshop was followed by an initiative to collect oral accounts from people who had acted in the social, political, and labor history of Senegal. Since then, education students are trained to collect oral testimonies and prepare pedagogical essays in the form of life histories. Their efforts produced the basis of an archive that now consists of twenty life histories obtained from politicians, trade unionists, former military recruits, and teachers. The students have examined their experiences to develop different points of view, opinions, and analyses of the events that have marked the social, political, and labor history of Senegal between 1946 and 1960.

Themes emerge from these oral accounts on three levels:

1. On the trade union and political level, accounts concern the general strike [January 1946], the abolition of forced labor [April 1946], the railroad workers’ strike [1947–1948], the struggle for the adoption of a labor law pertaining to Overseas France [1952], and decolonization [the Loi Cadre of 1956, the referendum of 1958, and the negotiations for the transfer of the apparatus of sovereignty in 1960]. The accounts come from two categories of eyewitnesses:

   a. Nationally recognized political leaders, such as Mame-
dou Dia, former Council President of the Republic
   [1957–1962]; Abdoulaye Ly, former Minister and Gen-
eral Secretary of the Parti pour le Rassemblement
   Africain, Senegal Section; and Kabirou Mbo, former
   Vice President of the National Assembly of Senegal.
b. Political militants and trade unionists of intermediate stature, including Abdoul Karim Sow, postal employee and journalist; the railroad men Souleye Sarr and Issakha Kante; the militant intellectual dissidents Amadou Aly Dieng, Tidiane Baïdy Ly, and Amath Ba. These leaders have always been overshadowed by the heroes of the railroad strike, men like Ibrahima Sarr, Aynima Fall, and Abdoulaye Ba, and the top leaders of the African Independance Party [PAI], such as Majh-mouth Diop and later on Seydou Cissokho.

2. In the social domain, accounts come from former soldiers who fought on different battlefields, or who participated in what France called "operations to maintain order" [Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam, in Algeria, and in Madagascar]; from female leaders on the evolution of the status of women, and from famous women in the history of the Senegalese kingdoms, like the princesses Yacine Buubou, Ndaté Yallah, and Ndiembót Mbođj.

3. On the economic level, accounts focus on the careers of traders from Saint-Louis in the trading centers of Tanaf in Casamance, Keur Samba Dia on the Petite Côte, Baba Garage in Baol, and Mékhé in Kayor.

Official sources have marginalized many of the leaders and activists who emerged after World War II. To counterbalance these sources and throw new light on novel themes, such as social and urban history, gender, and gender relations, the oral archive has given these eyewitnesses priority. The twenty testimonies are available on cassette. A collection of oral archives already transcribed is preserved in the oral history laboratory at the Ecole Normale Supérieure. The research team is working on a digitization project to improve the preservation of these oral materials and to make them more accessible to researchers. The first product put at the disposal of the general public is the book *Dialogue avec Abdoulaye Ly, historien et home politique senegalais* [Fall et al. 2001], which contains three interviews conducted over the course of one month. The interviewee drew on his recollections and personal archives. The research team encouraged him to express himself freely and tell the story of his life according to his own understanding and sensibility. The recorded testimony was transcribed and then turned over to the interviewee for review and approval. Only after this last stage has the interviewee's responsibility been engaged, because his words are then written down and thus become a source that any historian or specialist of the human sciences can consult, listen to, or use for the interpretation and reshaping of the past. Beyond the writing of history, the oral archives are now part of the teaching modules for students in junior and senior high schools.
The 1947–1948 Railroad Strike: Memory and Literature

The initial efforts of constituting an oral history archive focused on collecting testimonies from labor leaders involved in the 1947–1948 railroad strike. The historiography of contemporary Senegambia remembers the strike of the railroad men that took place between 10 October 1947 and 19 March 1948 as the most significant event in the collective memory of Francophone West Africa after World War II. This showdown between the African railroad men and the head office of the French West African territories mobilized twenty thousand strikers from all the territories of the former French West Africa. It centered on a demand for equality in status of all railroad men without regard to skin color. The mobilizing creed “equal pay for equal work” sums up the claim of the strikers, who, ironically, were using the ideology of imperialist assimilation to galvanize African nationalism.

The railroad workers’ victory changed the order of things between Africans and the metropole: the African railroad men discovered their strength and gained an awareness of being at the forefront of the fight for national emancipation. The strike has become widely known thanks to Ousmane Sembène’s God’s Bits of Wood (1960), a novel that describes the fight of the railroad men “as a crucial moment in the great anti-colonial mobilization in whose course a worker’s movement became aware of its strength, cast aside any idea of false compromise, and realized that it constituted a true popular movement, that is to say, a movement doubly engaged for the emancipation of a people and for the welfare of a social class” (Cooper, 1991:32).

The import of this strike has spurred researchers’ interest in exploring various aspects of the strike. During interviews conducted in July 1990, a research team, consisting of Babacar Fall (University Cheikh Anta Diop), Fred Cooper (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), and Mor Sène, a student who had completed a master’s thesis on the 1947–1948 railroad strike and was preparing a diplôme d’études approfondies, discovered the complex relationship between written history and the perception of this history by those who took part in the struggle. The strike gave rise to a social movement that brought to the forefront of political and trade union activities individuals whose experiences, though significant, remain unexplored. These leaders have an acute sense of the historical importance of their struggle and do not hesitate to discuss what has been made of it. In interviews, some of them contested chapter sixteen of Sembène’s novel, devoted to the women’s march from Thiès to Dakar, for example. In that chapter, Sembène relates how the railroad workers’ wives and the women of the industrial city of Thiès mobilized an enormous crowd to put pressure on the colonial administration to satisfy the workers’ demands. They led a march over a distance of seventy kilometers between Thiès and Dakar, then the capital of the French West African Federation. Sembène described the pressure of the mass of women as “a great river . . . rolling on to the sea”
[1970:304], yet the trade-union leaders Souleye Sarr and Abdoul Karim Sow have contested this account: they have declared firmly that such an event only took place in Sembène’s imagination.

It is understandable that Sembène might have taken certain liberties with the way this strike unfolded. He told the story by drawing on his imagination, reconstructing events according to the needs of his narrative. But what was the source of this inspiration? Given the colonial context, one might ask if Sembène did not reconstitute the vicissitudes of the railroad workers’ struggle by resorting to the principle of linking similar events that awakened the consciences of African populations under colonial domination. Twenty months after the victorious conclusion of the railroad workers’ struggle, more than 2000 women marched from Abidjan to Grand Bassam, a distance of 40 kilometers, in the colony of the Côte d’Ivoire. They demanded the liberation of eight leaders of the Parti Démocratique of the Côte d’Ivoire, a section of the Rassemblement Démocratique Africain. These leaders had been arbitrarily arrested on the sixth of February 1949 and detained in the prison of Grand Bassam. The march has been described by Henriette Diabaté, “not as a triumphant march but rather a difficult advance of scattered groups of women who braved police repression, moving through the palm groves or the sand along the beach” (Diabaté 1975:43). The event was characterized in the Rue Odinot in Paris, the center of French metropolitan administration, “as the first large-scale movement, the first courageous political protest, of West African women during the colonial period” (Diabaté 1975:57). One must ask if, in seeking to give women a glorious role in the railroad workers’ strike, Sembène did not transpose these women’s act of bravery into his account of the railroad strike. Should he be criticized for doing this in his literary work? Literary creation is naturally free. No one should hold it against Sembène that he took liberties with the facts and events of the strike, and thus the railroad men’s case against him is without cause.

Another illustration of the liberty Sembène took with reality relates to the chronology of political events in Senegal between 1946 and 1948. He altered the chronology to highlight what, according to the needs of his novel, led to the resolution of the crisis. He has the women’s march culminate in a large meeting, during which the decision to launch a general strike is made: “The next morning a general strike was called. It lasted for ten days, the time required before pressure from all sides forced the management of the railroad to resume the discussions with the delegates of the strikers” (1970:326).

There was in effect a general strike in Senegal a year and a half before the railroad workers’ strike. It lasted from January 14 to 26, in other words twelve and not ten days as indicated by Sembène Ousmane. According to Fred Cooper, this strike changed, “the structure of colonial policy on labor issues” (1991:32). In examining the sequence of events between 1946 and 1948 it becomes evident that the general strike of 1946 took place before the railway workers’ strike that lasted from 10 October 1947 to 19 March 1948.
Sembéne Ousmane thus inverted the sequence of events according to his own reading of historical reality. But, as suggested above, he is free to do so because a novelist is not bound by the norms of historiography.

The discussion of the railroad workers' memory in relation to Sembéne's novel underlines the need to preserve diverse historical sources. Unfortunately, the majority of surviving witnesses and participants in the railroad strike are beginning to lose their memories because of advanced age (75–80 years). Since many do not belong to the governing political elite, they remain unknown to the community of researchers and frequently die with their memories. The collection of testimonies in the context of training future history teachers makes it possible to develop a corpus of oral documents that can enlighten schoolchildren and community members, as well as national and international researchers.

**Conclusion**

The utility and purpose of history are being questioned by today's youths, who are more inclined to consume the images transmitted by the mass media, especially television, than to read life stories or other history manuals. In Africa as elsewhere, the power of the image has a strong hold on young people's imagination; moreover, globalization promotes a certain uniformity of individuals and cultures. Rethinking the teaching of history therefore becomes paramount if pedagogy is to help construct the memories of young Africans and prepare them to engage in the struggle for developing the continent.

African history now holds a rightful place in universities in Africa, Europe, and North America (White et al. 2001). Although a range of high-quality instructional materials that bring the latest research into the classroom exist, the poverty of resources limits what is available to African students in schools and universities. The African voice in particular constitutes only a small part in the teaching and learning of African history. One might even say that the silence of the African voice resonates in the classroom. To break with the classical approach to the teaching of history, the Department of History and Geography in the School of Education at the University Cheikh Anta Diop resolved to initiate education students into a pedagogy of history that privileges the collection of oral testimonies and their use in the classroom. It is the hope of those involved in the project that other African universities and schools of education will do likewise.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

An earlier version of this article was presented at a conference on "Oral Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge in Africa," held at Indiana University in May 2002. I thank the African Studies Program.
for providing me with the opportunity to participate in the conference and Maria Grosz-Ngaté for assisting with the translation of the manuscript. I also thank the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions, even if I have been unable to incorporate all of them. Thanks are due to my friend and colleague Fred Cooper for reading and commenting on the article. I alone am responsible for any shortcomings in the text.

REFERENCES CITED