

FOR ORAL TRADITION (BUT NOT AGAINST BRAUDEL)

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One wonders what Fernand Braudel and the school of the *Annales* have done to become a kind of Trojan Horse for the wholesale condemnation of the historical value of oral tradition. Yet they are the banner raised by W.G. Clarence-Smith in a recent article in his journal to preach *jihad* against its historical value.¹ Clarence-Smith claims that the historiographical revolution effected by *Annales* has resulted in the definitive exclusion of oral traditions from the halls of Clio. Oral traditions are at best ambiguous "signs" about the past and are very much of the present. They lack absolute chronology and they are selective, so away with them. If they be worthy of attention at all, let anthropologists and sociologists be concerned, save in a few rare instances where a historian wants to check on some European printed source. And even then, *caveat emptor*. Significantly, the article is not just the expression of the views of one person; rather it is symptomatic of much of the criticism which has been leveled at oral tradition, mostly by fashionable anthropologists. And it brings this criticism to its logical conclusion.

I.

But first a word about Braudel, the *Annales*, and oral tradition in general. The *Annales* School was founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch before World War II. Fernand Braudel is its most distinguished exponent. His major theoretical pronouncements can be found in his *Ecrits sur l'histoire*, a collection of articles reprinted and published in 1969.² This and his two major historical works should be read by those who want to know more about his views and ways of dealing with history.³ The basic tenets that members of the *Annales* School hold is that the history of events is but the spray of past developments; other time depths tell us more about the waves of the past. There is the time of the *conjoncture*, the trend, and the even longer time periods -- sometimes many centuries long -- the

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longue durée or long term. Successful history writing does not eliminate the study of events, but analyzes them against the movement of these longer and deeper-running trends.

In the introduction to his *Ecrits* Braudel recalls his long conversations with Henri Brunschwig when they were both prisoners of war, as well as similar conversations with Lucien Febvre.⁴ To historians of Africa this recalls that Brunschwig is also a member of the school of the *Annales* as well as a historian of Africa, while it was Febvre who coined the maxim that "the greatest danger which lurks for the historian is anachronism." And, as Brunschwig has pointed out, anachronisms are also perhaps the greatest pitfall for those who would study oral traditions. As for Bloch, we owe to him the best summing up of the role of oral tradition in medieval Europe and the most sensitive discussion of the characteristics of these sources for that time and place.⁵ Bloch did not condemn these materials out of hand, nor did Brunschwig, Braudel, or (so far as I know) any other contributor to *Annales*.

The danger for historians of Africa in using the approach of the *Annales* is in putting the cart before the proverbial horse. Whereas in Europe more than a century of diligent work has elucidated the succession of events in various spheres of human activity, this, until recently, had scarcely been begun in Africa, certainly not for pre-colonial history. The danger of anachronism is overwhelming when one begins to look for the long term or even for trends without any help from or check by a framework of a history dealing with ordinary events. One might just as well return to the old notion that Africa after all has no history, only a long-term evolution to be mapped out on broadly speculative lines. So, whereas the time was ripe for a wider approach in Europe, we have had to deal with the humdrum -- the framework -- for Africa first. This job is still far from finished, but we now have enough of a framework both to broaden out to such topics as the history of climate, health, agriculture, and the like, and to feel our way cautiously toward the *longue durée*, even though the level of the *conjoncture* still remains dim or unperceived.⁶

II.

But Clarence-Smith derives his argument, not from the *Annales*, but from Foucault and the theory of "signs."⁷ Oral traditions are signs because, as de Saussure maintained, they have a signifier and a signified like linguistic signs. The message is the signified, while the tradition itself is the signifier, and that is part of the present. So, since "the historian is a specialist of these past signs which have survived into the present," this innocuous-looking sentence eliminates traditions from the legitimate study of the historian.⁸

We are told that it is possible for oral traditions to contain signs of the past, but that there is no possible way of verifying this "scientifically." But what does "scientific" mean in this context? Should we not, by the same token, eliminate written documents? For instance, if they are copies from lost originals, how do we know "scientifically" how perfect the copy might be, how faithful to the original? But even originals cannot be trusted, for they are read by people *now* and the signs are understood in terms of present-day language and mores. By Foucault's reasoning even Greek, Latin, and classical Arabic are present-day languages because they are understood (the vital relationship between signifier and signified) in present-day terms. But who can guarantee "scientifically" and not by some (according to the Foucault school) inferior method such as that based on internal consistency and intelligibility that we can truly understand what the writer wanted us to understand? After all, the meanings of words and expressions, and even syntax, change over time. So do not use originals; leave them perhaps to the linguists. And thereby being denuded of sources we can then re-tool for another craft. Such reasoning is clearly a *reductio ad absurdum* and the fatal flaw is hypercriticism. In a sense we agree with Clarence-Smith in that we can only speculate to some greater or lesser degree about past events.⁹ In an even more powerful sense the present does not exist. All is either past or future, and therefore *everything* is but a matter for speculation. And is this not true for our very existence?

Is the lack of an absolute chronology sufficient reason for rejecting oral sources from the methodological field of the historian, as Clarence-Smith seems to argue? Here he uses the term "oral sources," so presumably even what is told about events some years back is useless.¹⁰ Ordering a body of documents without absolute chronology is compared to trying to organize a library with books that have no authors and titles. Poor Hampaté Ba, whose simile was that whenever an old man dies, a library dies with him! He is now told that it does not matter. But Clarence-Smith's metaphor is misleading. After all, not authors and titles, but dates are in question. He implies a classification by alphabetical order and a classification of documents on a chronological grid. Chronology is indeed the backbone of history, but relative chronologies can provide the necessary ordering for a given time and place. The problems then are different. How do relative chronologies interlock to provide a wider frame of reference? And how trustworthy are relative chronologies which are based on generation counts or similar methods? In each case the historian can work at finding a solution, but he does not throw out the

testimony wholesale. Do English historians abandon *Beowulf*, because it is not dated? Again the flaw is hypercriticism.

Lastly we are told that oral tradition is extremely selective. And so it is. We are told, too, that its information is essentially of a political, ideological, and legal nature, serving to reproduce the superstructures -- all of which makes it useless as a historical source. When this paragraph is read symptomatically -- another approach recently favored -- one discovers easily enough that "superstructure" extends into a simile in which ground floors, basements, and foundations correspond respectively to social, economic, and "infra-economic" history. We learn that Clarence-Smith reads Marxist literature and that social history holds the ground floor. He, too, is selective.

Yes. In fact all written sources are selective, even the article we are commenting on here. Of course historians must be aware of the impact of selectivity in their sources if they are to avoid distortions. On the other hand they must not abandon a source merely because it is selective, but only remember that what it says is not all that can be said. After all, if we were to strike out all selective sources we would have to forget about all history and testimony. Hypercriticism again, and more. For surely if oral sources were supposed to yield social or economic data, they might perhaps be spared?

Moreover, the statement is too sweeping, much too sweeping. Oral traditions most of the time tell us about events, and very often of course these are political. They sometimes, too, tell us about perceived trends, often disguised as events (for example, "maize was invented then and there"). Oral traditions tell us about trade and production and social strife and even general social conditions (in oral literary documents), but they do not very often quantify. To appreciate what traditions can do or cannot do, how and in what precise ways they are selective in a given society, we must find them and analyze them. And their characteristics will vary from society to society and from source to source. No sweeping generalizations will do. But then such practice apparently is not what our author wants; leave traditions to sociologists or archeologists is his advice.

Oral tradition can contain information about the past and it is in that capacity that historians should study it. This is obviously particularly true for historians of Africa to whom such sources (including oral history) remain so crucially important, both because of the paucity of other data and because of the need to hear the voice of Africans themselves. We cannot simply leave it to specialists of "present signs." For almost half a century anthropologists have done precious little in Africa about oral traditions beyond the statement that they were "charters" (Social Anthropology) or "myths" (the Parisian anthropologists). And historians were supposed to confine them-

selves to written data. So the collection and interpretation of oral data were left to administrators, missionaries, African intellectuals, or other eccentrics. Finally some historians began to take a genuine interest in oral tradition as a *genre* and it was not long before a few acid critics among the anthropologists began arguing that everything in oral tradition was structure, symbol, myth, and "new"; nothing was real or "past." And it is still fashionable, especially in east and central Africa and among anthropologists, to throw the baby out with the bathwater. For if, indeed, oral tradition is always one or more of these things, it also contains a message and a bit of the real past.

Certainly anthropologists, sociologists, folklorists, and specialists in African oral literature have highly valuable and interesting contributions to make in this field. But it remains the truth of common sense that only historians have the *past* as their main concern. It is they who want to find out what happened and how; they who are trained -- in an unscientific way perhaps, but trained nevertheless -- to develop a familiarity with testimony from the past that leads to an informed judgment. They are trained to be judiciously critical, but neither gullible nor hypercritical. They are also trained to take note of whatever others might find concerning various aspects of sources, including oral sources, and to take it into account in their own judgments. So historians worth their salt should continue to study oral tradition even though there will always be inappropriate comments and people who think, for instance, that C¹⁴ dating for the past two or three centuries is necessarily more precise than chronologies derived from oral tradition, or that linguists are primarily historians of language and have all the answers, so that historians simply have to sit back, eyes closed, and be grateful for whatever falls into their begging bowls. Such attitudes do not, I fear, foster knowledge.

With all practitioners in the field we can re-affirm that oral traditions are legitimate and valuable sources for the historian -- sources which admittedly are usually difficult to handle, but which can yield information about past events and past trends. They are indispensable if we hope to arrive at a genuine understanding of what happened in Africa (or any of a number of other places) and we can only regret that there are not more traditions surviving or that most of them relate only to the past couple of centuries. We must be cautious in handling these materials, but neither too ingenuous nor too critical. If we are the former we tell tales; if the latter, we are sterile.

NOTES

1. "For Braudel: A Note on the 'Ecole des Annales' and the Historiography of Africa," *History in Africa*, 4(1977), pp. 275-81. For the latest and fullest account of the *Annales* school see Traian Stoianivich, *French Historical Method: the 'Annales' Paradigm* (Ithaca, 1976).
2. Fernand Braudel, *Ecrits sur l'histoire* (Paris, 1969).
3. Idem, *La Méditerranée et le monde Méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (2d ed., Paris, 1966); idem, *Civilisation matérielle et capitalisme* (Paris, 1967). Clarence-Smith relies on translations of Braudel's work wherever possible, but one aspect of hypercriticism would be to ask whether translations are always reliable.
4. Braudel, *Ecrits*, pp. 5-7.
5. Marc Bloch, *La société féodale* (2 vols.: Paris, 1940).
6. See Jan Vansina, *The Children of Woot: a Kuba History* (Madison, 1978).
7. Marcel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969).
8. Clarence-Smith, "For Braudel," p. 277.
9. Ibid., p. 278.
10. Ibid. For Clarence-Smith oral sources is clearly a synonym for oral traditions.