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The Arts and Collaborative Research: The History Example

By

Abi A. Derefaka, Ph.D

Professor of Archaeology

Department of History and Diplomatic Studies

University of Port Harcourt

e-mail: abidere@yahoo.co.uk

This contribution takes as given the fact that collaborative research is both desirable and enriching in the achievement of research objectives in the arts. If one were to point to a single concept that unites research in the arts, one would opt for *Culture*. It is a concept that takes into account, among other things, relics, as well as continuity and change (History/Archaeology); sounds, words, syntax, and composition (Language/Literature); ideas and thought patterns (Philosophy); the making of material things (Fine Arts & Design); and belief systems, rituals etc. (Religion). This is why it is important for researchers in the Arts to collaborate or at least keep in touch with colleagues in sister disciplines in the Arts. For example, while ceramics are made by researchers in Fine and industrial arts, it is the mostly fragmentary remains of ceramics that the Archaeologist studies. For both researchers the nature of the clay used is important, so also are the use of burnishing and decorative techniques, as well as the form and function of the ceramic objects. It stands to reason, therefore, that they could work together on some joint projects in the Faculty. If that proves difficult to implement, there should be greater interaction and exchange of information among researchers.

But then what is Culture? From the 1860 definition of the term by Tylor the concept has meant different things to different scholars. Definitions preferred range from Tylor's all-inclusive one through the organic view of culture proposed by Kroeber which is reflected in Wagner's (1975:2) definition; through definitions that emphasise the ideational aspect of culture such as that of Geertz (1966:3); and those that emphasise the material aspects of culture such as Leslie White; to definitions that stress the inter-relationship between the ideational and material aspects on one hand and the physical environment on the other such as Andah (1982:49). What is certain, however, is that it is distinct from the related concept,

Society. Some scholars who have discussed this distinction include Eggan, 1954:361 and Schneider, 1979. While agreeing that the term culture refers to the totality of a people's way of life, it is useful to indicate that a broad distinction between material and non-material culture is both valid and helpful.

Before we return to this general discussion later, it is important that we turn to the example in the discipline of History. So what is History? The word itself is derived from the Greek word "historia" used originally by Greek philosophers to mean systematic enquiry, that is, inquiry into metaphysics. The father of History, Herodotus (C. 484-430 B.C.) was the first to use the word in the specific sense of inquiry into the human past so as to understand what happened in the past and convey same to readers as effectively as possible. According to him History narrates actual events and human action. History is essentially a presentation of selected and recorded events, situations, actions, and thoughts of man, which the narrator or writer or the society itself considers important. The means of recording historical events in various societies include the use of oral traditions, which preserve and transmit the history of a people by word of mouth from one generation to the next. For orally literate societies drumlore is also important. Furthermore, some items of a people's material culture preserve aspects of their history. Here even ethnographic data from relatively recent times can be used as a source of information for a more distant past using the technique that has been known as "words and things" (See for example, Vansina, 1997: 45). Writing is perhaps the best known means of recording history. However, writing is only about five thousand years old. We now know that man's past goes back to more than two and half million years ago. This is part of why historians have sought collaboration in research with archaeologists, linguists, anthropologists, palynologists etc. to fill chronological and other gaps effectively.

The importance of oral traditions in the reconstruction of the past of the major occupants of the Niger Delta – the Ijo cannot be overemphasized. Commenting on Dike's important work on the Niger Delta (Dike, K. O., 1956), Alagoa (1975: 176) says, "The interpretation of the external documents related to the external dimension of the study was masterly, but Dike's attempts to interpret internal history and developments did not prove so successful since a deep enough study could not yet be made of the internal oral traditional data." One agrees with Alagoa that "local" history,

which he calls "internal" history cannot be properly reconstructed for orally literate societies such as those of the Ijo, without dependence on a corpus of systematically collected body of oral traditions of the people concerned.

Although a fuller discussion of the nature of traditions and their usefulness and limitations will come later in this work, it is perhaps useful to indicate from the onset that oral traditions are testimonies and other accounts of events in the past by original narrators and the inheritors of their legacies. One important means of recording and transmitting oral traditions among the Ijo has been drum lore. Also, legends and family, as well as lineage genealogies are important aspects of Ijo oral traditions. Moreover, as Alagoa (1972:3) rightly points out, "since there are few written records covering periods before the nineteenth century, studies of those periods have necessarily to rely almost solely on oral traditions." For the archaeology of the Delta, to which one intends to shift focus after discussing how oral traditions have been used in the Eastern Niger Delta, Alagoa's assertion above has appeared to apply mainly because of the relatively difficult terrain and thick vegetation cover of the Delta.

But first, one should take a look at how oral traditions have been used in the reconstruction of the past for the Eastern Niger Delta. The scholar who has used systematically collected and professionally analysed oral traditions most extensively in the reconstruction of the past in the Eastern Niger Delta has been E. J. Alagoa and to his works we must now return. The concluding chapter of his book *A History of the Niger Delta: An historical interpretation of Ijo oral traditions* (1972:187-194) shows clearly that oral traditions have been used to reconstruct Ijo origins and migrations as well as their economic and political history. The traditions have also been useful in dating events and have exhibited a number of stereotypes and clichés. Before discussing the other use of oral traditions in reconstructing the past of the Eastern Niger Delta, it might be useful to look at Alagoa's discussion elsewhere of one of the major areas of contribution he has identified, namely, dating of events. He says,

The Ijo have lived in the lower Niger for a long time. They have lived there so long that their life has become fully integrated with the unique environment of the Delta, and their oral traditions can no longer remember a place of origin outside the Delta. The Ijo may indeed have separated from their mainland neighbours, the Igbo, Edo and Yoruba, as long as five thousand years ago. Such brothers,

and such a length of physical separation from her bigger brothers, and such length of sojourn in the Delta can be contemplated since the geological age of the Delta itself may be in excess of ten thousand years... We may put the information in the foregoing statement into the form of a simplified time-chart as follows:

4000 B.C. – A.D. 0	Ijo settlement of the Central Delta.
A.D. 0 – 1000	Migrations to the Easter and Western Delta.
A.D. 1000 – 12000	Development of the fishing village type institutions of the Eastern Delta.
A.D. 1400 – 1600	Development of all the major institutions of the Eastern Delta city-states.
A.D. 1600 – 1900	Full impact of the Atlantic trade leading to various changes and modifications – secondary migrations to the Delta peripheries (Alagoa, 1975:19).

Concerning migrations, Alagoa has concluded that the major direction of migration was from the Central Delta to the Eastern Delta although there is a cautious rider to this conclusion as he says,

The traditions of the Eastern Delta states clearly derive the peoples from the Central Delta although there are suggestions of original proto-Ijo populations in parts of the area. The four states (Nembe, Okrika, Elem Kalabari and Bonny) tell traditions of origin, which put them into two simple categories. Nembe and Okrika routes of migrations lie completely within the Delta West to East. Elem Kalabari and Bonny traditions tell of periods in the hinterland followed by a return into the Delta. These two states also seem to refer to the same dispersal centre in the Central Delta, namely, the Ogobiri-Igbedi Creek region. (Alagoa, 1972:158)

To this conclusion we shall return later in this work. As earlier stated, apart from addressing the question of origins of migration, oral traditions have been used to investigate the development of economic and political institutions in the Niger Delta. Again, Alagoa's articles (1970 and 1971 respectively) demonstrate how this has been done. These two contributions deal with Trade and Politics and the development of institutions in the Eastern Niger Delta respectively.

Even in the second contribution the economic base of socio-political organisation is emphasised as the writer states from the onset that his reconstruction of "the process of change and formation of institutions similarly (i.e. like those of K. O. Dike, 1956; G. I. Jones, 1963 and Robin Horton, 1969) concentrates on the deterministic impact of economic factors. No attempt has been made to list other non-economic factors" (Alagoa, 1971:269). Unlike Horton (1969), who made the fishing village of the Eastern Delta his launching pad in tracing institutional change, Alagoa uses the farming village of the Central Delta as his "baseline of change" indicating that the fishing village had "developed from the farming village of the Central Delta." Alagoa suggests that the political and social systems of the Eastern Delta have their antecedents in the Central Delta systems because both sets of systems are similar. This he attributes to the cultural and ethnic affinity between the Eastern and Central Delta areas where, for example, most communities speak dialects of Ijo. A further proof is that the oral traditions of the Eastern Delta city-states point to places in the Central and Western Delta as their original homes.

Also important for this study are Alagoa's views on the nature and use of oral traditions. He has advocated, for example, that the oral historian must seek information on a given community's environment and all aspects of that community's life (See *KIABARA: The Ethnographic dimension of Oral Tradition*). This means that apart from the direct historical traditions which have been formally handed down, the inputs of oral literature and the ethnographic record need to be taken into account. He says,

"The use of ethnographic data should become a routine part of the work of historians of oral traditions."

As he rightly observed in his conclusion however, the work of gathering ethnographic data in the Niger Delta is still at a preliminary stage. This is so because even the Adumu (*Odum*) or Python cult example, which

he explored, yielded inconclusive results. Despite this, one is inclined to believe that more emphasis on the ethnographic aspects of the collection of oral traditions would yield information useful to more disciplines including Archaeology.

Moreover, this concern with the ethnographic dimension in Niger Delta studies predates the efforts of Professor E. J. Alagoa. As Anozie (1976:89) rightly points out, anthropological work on peoples and institutions in the Niger Delta had been carried out by Leonard (1906), Thomas (1910), Talbot (1926, 1932), among others, before Academic Historians started work in the Niger Delta. Although Jones (1963) had doubted the usefulness of oral traditions as a source for reconstructing the past in the Niger Delta (describing such traditions in the area as either a "mass of uncoordinated and often contradictory material" or "authorized version(s) for external consumption"), it is now evident that oral traditions have led to the shedding of more light on what he has referred to as the "Prehistoric" and protohistoric stages of the Niger Delta's past. Less sceptical of the potentialities of oral traditions, Anene, for example, admits that the oral traditions "are clearly inconclusive evidence", but makes the important suggestion that "eventually the disciplines of comparative linguistics and archaeology may throw considerable light on what is now very obscure."

Indeed, to discuss the lack of confidence of these two writers in Niger Delta oral traditions would be to discuss the limitations of sources of historical information (including written records) with particular emphasis on the problems of collection, analysis and the use of oral traditions in reconstructing the past. Such a discussion is likely to dim the focus of this work and since the validity of oral traditions as a source of information for reconstructing the past has gained wider acceptability (as a result of the work of Vansina (1965, 1985), Alagoa (1972), Andah (1979, 1982), etc., it would be more useful and perhaps more relevant to proceed to a discussion arising from the important suggestion made by Anene (1963) concerning the role Archaeology could play in the reconstruction of the past of the Niger Delta. This is because Alagoa's use of oral traditions to reconstruct the past of the Ijo of the Niger Delta has demonstrated that despite the limitations of oral traditions as a source (some of which are not restricted to oral traditions alone) it is feasible to reconstruct the past of Niger Delta peoples using oral traditions. Moreover, as Alagoa (1976b:3) has

indicated,

Anthropologists (socio-cultural) who have tried to extend their studies into the past have also tended to offend historians by their concentration on theorising and model building of their works, which are successful as historical accounts have been devoted to comparatively recent activities in the nineteenth century or later.

Now to archaeology and how it has been used in the reconstruction of the past of the Eastern Niger Delta. Indeed, there is no gainsaying the fact that archaeological research in the Niger Delta began at the instance of an oral historian, Professor E. J. Alagoa. As he has explained (Alagoa, 1976b:3-4):

Because of the difficulties and limitations already apparent in the use of oral traditions and anthropology, it was decided to resort to archaeology in the study of Niger history. The explanation is, that archaeology would add concreteness and a more secure chronological base to cultural reconstructions that would be considered mere fabrication if derived from oral traditions alone, or as merely hypothetical if derived from anthropology. The plan is ... that excavations should eventually be carried out at old sites indicated by the oral traditions. Thus, each individual excavation not only tells the story of developments in understanding of inter-relationships, contacts, migrations, trade, and diffusion of goods and ideas throughout the Niger Delta and with the Nigerian hinterland.

To this list of expectations from archaeological research in the Niger Delta, one needs to add the objectives stated by Anozie and Nzewunwa for the research they subsequently undertook in the Eastern Niger Delta with the active participation of Alagoa. But perhaps before examining their objectives, which indicate how archaeology has been used in Eastern Delta research, it would be useful to summarize, here, the history

of archaeological research in the Niger Delta.

It is interesting to note that of the 400 sites produced by the reconnaissance of Eastern Nigeria by Hartle between 1963 and 1967, none appears to have been in the Niger Delta. Surely, none of the fourteen sites excavated by him (Hartle, 1967) was in the Niger Delta (Anozie, Nzewunwa and Derefaka 1987:122). As Anozie (1978:3) has rightly chronicled, the first organised archaeological fieldwork in the Niger Delta was undertaken in December 1972 by a research team from the University of Ibadan made up of Professor Thurstan Shaw, Professor E. J. Alagoa and F. N. Anozie then a junior research fellow in Archaeology. The team carried out reconnaissance at "Onyoma, Nembe, Oruokolo, Kaiko, Ke, Brass and Ogbolomabiri and spent a few days studying these sites which were previously recorded by Alagoa while studying the oral tradition(s) of the area. This statement agrees with Anozie's earlier information {Anozie, 1976:90) that,

Alagoa, while recording the oral traditions, noted many ancient settlement sites, which were regarded as dispersal centres of the Ijo people. It was therefore, decided to start by investigating some of these sites.

When the team returned to Ibadan about the end of December 1972 the data obtained was analysed and so it was decided that test pits should be excavated at Onyoma, Ke, and Oruokolo "to study the cultural materials they contain and date them." The excavations at Onyoma and Ke were done in May, April and December 1973. Transport, among other difficulties, made it impossible for excavations to be carried out at Oruokolo. Apart from Alagoa and Anozie, Dr. (Mrs.) M. A. Sowunmi, a Palynologist participated in the excavations and her main concern was to "study the present and past vegetations of the area" (Anozie, 1978:6).

It was in June 1974 that the Ogoloma site was excavated. Alagoa had drawn attention to the site and reconnaissance was carried out in December 1973. In December 1975, the Saikiripogu site was excavated (Anozie, 1978:8). A new dimension to the research came in December 1976. Nwanna Nzewunwa, a junior research fellow at University of Nigeria, Nsukka, arrived from Cambridge to undertake the excavation at Okochiri. The explanation for this assertion will become evident when the research objectives before and after his introduction to Niger Delta

archaeological work are examined. Perhaps one should state here that there are now accounts that have brought this summary of the history of archaeological research in the Niger Delta up to date except for the most recent excavations at Finima excavated near Bonny (see Anozie, Nzewunwa and Derefaka, 1987 and Nzewunwa and Derefaka, 1989 as well as Derefaka, 2003).

In the Central Niger Delta three sites, namely, Agadagbabou, Koroama, and Isomabou have been excavated. In the area of chronology, whereas the evidence from palynology indicates positive evidence in the vegetation for human occupation of the Delta from about 3,000 years ago, linguistic evidence indicates that the Ijoid language group had become separate and moved into the Niger Delta about 7,000 years ago. Archaeological evidence, on the other hand, has provided radiometric dates of about 1,000 years ago on the average for some early settlement of the Niger Delta. The dates from Isomabou in the Central Delta conform to the age range obtained from the Eastern Delta sites. What this means is that contrary to the impression that the first radiocarbon dates from Agadagbabou suggested, there appears to be some truth in the oral tradition claims of the freshwater Central Delta being an area of Ijo dispersal. However, with the chronological framework now available as follows:

Ke, A.D. 770-1270; Okochiri, A.D. 850-1500;
Saikiripogu, A.D. 1010-1640; Ogoloma, A.D. 1030-1480; Onyoma, A.D. 1275-1690; Isomabou, A.D. 1030-1480; Agadagbabou, A.D. 1640-1730; Koroama, last 400 years

It seems as if more than one centre of dispersal for the Ijo in the Niger Delta is a possibility. With regard to the chronological framework for the Central Niger Delta, the present evidence is that there has been continuous occupation and exploitation of resources in the Central Niger Delta by the Ijo from about 1030 A.D. to the present. Whereas some sites like Isomabou were occupied between the 11th and 15th centuries A.D. and abandoned, others like Agadagbabou were occupied until the early 18th century and abandoned while yet others like Koroama were established not more than about three hundred years ago and are still inhabited. Finally, as this writer has said elsewhere, (Derefaka, 2003:231), from extrapolations from Sowunmi's (1981:468) palynological analysis of

Shell B.P. Boring 22 core one has suggested that there is a strong possibility that by 800 B.C. the practice of agriculture was going on in the Central Niger Delta. Apart from the details provided earlier of how Ijo as a language group has been subdivided, Kay Williamson's comments (1989:10, 13, 16, 18, 20 and 21) concerning the place of the language group in the classification of the Niger-Congo language family is useful as they show how far removed Ijoid is from the languages it is said to have separated from some 7,000 years ago, namely Yoruba and Igbo.

Perhaps it is fitting that one should end this discussion of the necessity for the use of a multidisciplinary approach with a quotation from Jan Vansina (1997: 56-57) in his contribution titled "On Combining Evidence" to the Festschrift for Professor E. J. Alagoa:

The reconstruction of a full-fledged African History requires that information derived from sources studied by different disciplines be fitted together.... Combining evidence from different disciplines is essential for a reasonably full historical reconstruction and it works well in practice. But it seems to pose a problem of competence. No single person can hope to be familiar with all the disciplines involved. One proposed solution: the setting up of a team of specialists in different disciplines to tackle a common problem seemed reasonable but has not worked out well in practice. Major reasons for this failure were that every specialist worked on matters of interest to him or her and not primarily on the common problem to be solved, and that in a team no single mind was in charge of the historical reconstruction that should have resulted. The lesson is that it is up to historians to reconstruct history because that is their only goal as opposed to other specialists, except in part for archaeologists. Even if historians seem to be only trained in the use of written documents and sometimes oral data they are in fact also trained to evaluate the quality and biases of various sources. They are trained to deal with the specifics of human activity and thought over time and acquire an excellent sense of what time means in a human dimension as measured by a lifetime or generations.

It can, however, be said that even if collaborative research in the Arts is desirable but difficult to implement when a team is constituted to

work on a common problem, it is still necessary for researchers in the Arts to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to their research. Indeed, the combination of evidence from different disciplines enriches the end product.

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