

# The Problem of Oral Sources in the Writing of the Pre-Colonial History of Congo-Brazzaville: Methodology and Reflection

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## ABSTRACT

The text speaks of the importance of oral sources in the authentic reconstruction of the past of the collective memory of the African peoples. Congolese historical thought must be freed from the influence of colonial historiography. It is in this new approach that researchers could enrich themselves with new methods by looking into the neighboring disciplines. Several elements have not been taken into account by the Europeans in the writing of the history of the people and of African civilization. In the writing of the true history of the African peoples, oral sources remain unavoidable in spite of their deformation from generation to generation and their lack of dating, for history is first and foremost its location in time.

**Keywords:** Sources Orals, History Civilization Pre-Colonial, Reconstitution Memory

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The writing of the history of Congolese society is done from the twentieth century that of the interior of the Congo concerning the pre-colonial period is little known, for lack of written documents. Today, the great advances are made in human sciences. More and more, historian researchers in general and Congolese in particular, are investing in the great work of systematic excavations, with a view to recovering with certainty the traces of their foremost ancestors. Because to know its past to have the references to the human past helps the researcher-historian to defend itself against any form of alienation and of uprooting of which it is a victim. It is true that the Congo before being in contact with the Western world through navigators, explorers, traders, and missionaries, was organized in families, clans, tribes, lineages, chiefdoms and kingdoms. The history of the black peoples of Africa is badly written, that of the Congo in the pre-colonial period is even less known, for lack of written documents. It should be noted that some texts on precolonial Congo were printed from the beginning of the Christianization of the coastal region of the Congo from the first half of the fifteenth century. The objective of this paper is to study the problem of oral sources in the pre-colonial history of Congo Brazzaville.

## 2. THE STORIES OF EUROPEAN TRAVELERS

The writings of sailors, merchants, missionaries and other European sailors have for the most part led to an erroneous and partial description of reality. Henceforth, African historiography is completely overused. Being foreign to the socio-cultural reality of a people whose roots are to be deprived, these European Africanists perfidiously evacuated the historical heritage of the Congolese indigenous peoples to the point of making it a vulgar appendage of their history. To this end, the reductionist view of authors like Hegel, Levy Brult, François-Xavier, Fauvelle-Aymar, Jean-Pierre Chrétien and

their successors is an apodictic proof of this. Despite the false information that pombeiros and mubiri could provide Duarte

Lopes inside the Kongo and the neighboring countries of the Kingdom of Makoko, Hegel declared since 1830 in his book *Discourse on the Philosophy of History: Africa n' Is not a historical part of the world. It has no movement, developments show, historical movements in it ... This precisely we mean by Africa is a historical mind, the undeveloped mind still wrapped in natural conditions* <sup>1</sup>.

Other African Africanists have gone further in their investigations into African realities. Copland, for example, speaking of the characteristics of East African said in 1928: *Until David Livingstone, one can say that Africa itself had been no history and that the majority of its inhabitants had remained immersed in barbarity. Such was he seems The decree of nature. They remained stagnant without advance nor retreat* <sup>2</sup>

But this position was defeated by Africanists still aware of the deep historicity of Africa. Ki-Zerbo and to write:

<sup>1</sup> Hegel quoted by J. Ki-Zerbo, 1970: *History of Black Africa, Yesterday to Tomorrow*, Paris, Hatier, p10

<sup>2</sup> Coupland quoted by J. Ki-Zerbo, 1970: *History of Black Africa, from yesterday to tomorrow*, Paris, Hatier, p. 15

*The man has made history all he touched in his creative hand: the stone such as paper, fabrics such as metals, wood as the most precious jewels. We do not deny, far from it, the value of the written evidence. But, out of necessity and conviction, we reject the narrow and outdated conception of history by written proof alone, the theory according to which certain zones of Africa would be painted out of prehistory. By definition we say that wherever there are humans there is invention, there is*

*change, there are a problem and a dynamic of progress, so there is history in real sense*<sup>3</sup>

There is no human society in the world where men living together leave no memory or have no memory of their previous experience. In other words, wherever there are humans there are social structures and systems. And this is valid both in the oldest society, known as primitive society and in chiefdoms conceived as the intermediate form between the society based on the lineage and that endowed with a good organization, like the kingdoms.

The whole analysis will deal with the past of the Congolese peoples of the pre-colonial period. It is a question of freeing Congolese historical thought from the grip of colonial historiography. For decolonizing African history means going beyond the European vision which preaches the very agitated and limited stage of events. It also enhance oral sources, the credibility in order to make them valid documents for the drafting of Congolese history, without compromising the written sources, as revealed Febvre:

*History is made with Documents written without a doubt. When there are, however, it can be done, it must try to be done, at all costs, without written documents if there is none. All that is of man depends on the man, serves man, expresses man, signifies the presence, the activity, the tastes, the ways of being of the man. All this is a document for the historian.*<sup>4</sup>

This new approach will allow researchers in the social sciences and humanities to become enriched by methods, using neighboring disciplines. For a society such as that of the Congo characterized by orality, it seems wise to find other ways to facilitate the writing of its history. Thus the writing of the history of Congo-Brazzaville of the colonial era requires not only written documents but also oral sources.

<sup>3</sup> - J. Ki-Zerbo, 1970: *History of Black Africa, from yesterday to tomorrow*, Paris, Hatier, p 15

<sup>4</sup> Lefevre quoted by ANdingaMbo *For a history of Congo - Brazzaville. Methodology and thinking*, Paris, Harmattan, p. 62

Knowledge of the traditional African society in pre-colonial times has spread thanks to the enormous effort of sailors, explorers, missionaries, colonizers and many other European researchers who have reported through their writings the different stages of their adventure. Unfortunately, these European Africanists, pioneers of foreign history were very limited in their investigations. A few issues determine the emergence of the imperious writing of the Congo's history before the colonial influence. These are the distortion and desecration of the historical heritage of African peoples, the superficial look of European researchers on African culture and civilization, the difficulty of accessing the various archives, and the place of historical heritage Congolese in the true knowledge of universal history.

### **3. THE DISTORTION AND DESECRATION OF THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF THE AFRICAN PEOPLE**

Africa, a geographically vast continent, with a large population, very attached to its culture is not far from being a safe of mankind, often victim and source of covetousness. Not only did it serve as an outlet for the great European industrialists in the eighteenth century and supply these European detractors with valid men sold into slavery, but it also became the reservoir of the raw materials of the European powers. The African researcher has to invest himself with the body in this undertaking likely to lead him to the values of his most distant ancestor. The sketch of African historiography sketched by European researcher's aims to disarticulate the collective memory, seeking to denigrate the main historical facts of pre-colonial African society. In his book *History of Black Africa* J. Ki-Zerborévèle that: *Some historians, eager to minimize the slave cavil figures, as if 10 million more or less a phenomenon of this magnitude could change the historical dimension and even less the moral significance*<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> J. Ki-Zerbo 1972: *History of Black Africa*, Paris, Hatier, p. 219

Also, most European explorers and navigators have in their reports of expedition voyages sapped the germs of the emergence of an African historical patrimony. Thus the satirical vision of Albert climb in his report of voyages in the earth of Africa is a proof. It is clear from his writings: Africa is part of the negroes and Austria, giraffes and Hippos, burning desert and mysterious river<sup>6</sup>.

This reflex of the cultural hegemony of the West makes African historiography:

*Vulgar appendix, a fragment of the history of the colonizing countries*<sup>7</sup>

The question of the writing of African history is a real African problem which requires an African response and no one knows better the tradition of a more concerned native himself. In reality, Africa is a society typically based on oral tradition made up of formulas, proverbs, stories, tales, legends, and myths. As a whole, the traditional African environment has many values, but often esoteric, of which the elder or the elder holds the key to interpretation. This characteristic specific to the socio-cultural reality of pre-colonial Africa is a cornerstone in understanding and writing the history of African society. Consequently, the different approaches of European researchers on the anthropology of black peoples in Africa are very far from reality. This misinterpretation of collective memory leads ipso facto to false conclusions. Indeed, the overestimation of European civilization, the lack of reliable information on the organization and the functioning of the traditional African society constitute the real reason for the deformation and profanation of the collective memory of the negro- African countries. Indeed all societies are endowed with a culture and a civilization. Thus, these values determine the activities or life of the population in an organized space. However, in order to fully understand the prowess and shortcomings of a people whose roots are unknown, it seems wise to immerse themselves in its ancient environment. And this is almost inadmissible in the eyes of the colonists who relegate to the rank of animosity any activity undertaken by the Negro-African. This is why African history as conceived by Europeans is totally distorted. For they have just transcribed or

expressed in writing the bad representation they have had of the black man in order to subjugate him to their culture.

<sup>6</sup> A. Montemont quoted by J. Dumont, 19: *General History of Africa: the great explorations of the 1850A Africa today* p. 9

<sup>7</sup> J. Ki-Zerbo, 1972: *The history of Black Africa from yesterday to tomorrow*, Paris, Hatier, p.9

#### 4. THE SUPERFICIALITY OF THE EURO-CENTRIST VIEW OF THE CULTURES AND CIVILIZATIONS OF BLACK AFRICA

The notoriety of African historiography results from the authentic reconstruction of African historical consciousness. This historic African logic makes it possible to recognize, above all, the richness of the African past, its home of brilliant organized civilizations, empires, kingdoms and chiefdoms. Consequently, the assertions made by certain Euro-centrist Africanists aim at paralyzing by their cultural intimidation the emergence of the African intelligentsia. T. Obenga rising against the Euro-centrist Africanists writes:

*The racist and Euro-centrist Africanists ... are transforming our clearly stated scientific and political objectives into ideological objectives to blur the current African situation. For these old and new Africanists have the art of defamation, division and lies* <sup>8</sup>

Worse is the fierce reaction by Hegel held that since 1830 in his course on *the history the philosophy* excluded Africa from the circle of men with the rational faculty, this natural light allowing the man to take the initiatives in development. The European pretension of wanting to reproach Africa with its static or ahistorical spirit is sufficiently indicative of a very superficial sociocultural analysis.

Although African history suffers from the lack of documents, this is not enough to evacuate the traces of collective memory to a whole people. Hegel's view of African history is very limited, for what makes the history of a civilized people or not is the whole of his activities, his experience of life; The story of a man begins from conception and ends with death. Hegel in his research on the history of black Africa deduces that:

*Africa is no historical part of the world* <sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> ThObenga., 2001: *The sense of struggle against Eurocentric Africanism*, France, L'Harmattan, p.59

<sup>9</sup> Hegel quoted by J. Ki-Zerbo 1970: *History of Black Africa from yesterday to tomorrow*, Paris, Hatier, p.10

Yet African society like all others has a human past that is its own. Historical excavations show that Africa knows a very old humanity. For historians, *Africa is the cradle of humanity* <sup>10</sup>

This hypothesis has been contested by European researchers who, because of their erroneous statements, absolutely want to keep this region in a state of prostration. Until then, navigators, anthropologists, and missionaries have for the most part convinced the world that, when they first came into contact with the African coasts, the natives sank in a dark territory

where there was neither light nor light. Cultural influence. Indeed these shippers were motivated by one desire, to make known to the world: *Africa is the mother of monsters, lions and wild, and particularly the black African cannibals and bloody idols, could not be for the missionaries of the twenty-first century than the devil, for the positivists of the sixteenth century as the domain of unreason. For classical historians, it was something worse: nothingness; because it lacked the written document, only food worthy of their muse* <sup>11</sup>

These Western scholars and missionaries have, in their investigations of African reality, dealt with things superficially. These shortcomings are due to a lack of reliable information and a poor choice of method to provide the most explicit data. This truncated anthropology still called "verandas", focuses its analyses on the data collected by non-specialists. Henceforth, the outline of this African historiography would be seen as the work of European improvisation. Without specialty, the explorers from the West have interfered in this writing of the historical heritage of the African peoples. The appropriation of collective memory by the predecessors of the colonial system is this effect, one of the major causes of the deformation and superficiality of reflection on the African past. In this respect, the writings of the Reverend Capuchin Friars are an illustration of this.

<sup>10</sup> D. Cheik Anta 1993: *Anticipation of Negro civilizations, myths or historical truth*, Paris, PUF. P. 20

<sup>11</sup> B. Davison, 1962 *Africa before the white, discovery of the forgotten past of Africa*, Paris, PUF. III-VI.

The few writings and cartographic reproductions of the Congo hinterland of the pre-colonial period are easily exploitable. Thus the analysis or the historical approach made by the European researchers proved very limited compared to the means and methods involved in demolishing to a whole people the base of its identity.

#### 5. THE INACCESSIBILITY OF ARCHIVES CENTERS

The study of history is made and will always be done by means of written documents. This postulate remains irrefragable; nevertheless, traditional African society, although typically oral, has some relatively rare written sources. These written sources are divided into four categories according to Cheikh Anta Diop in his book " *Anticipation of Negro civilizations* " it is the traditional sources of antiquity, Arab sources of the Middle Ages, modern sources of passengers and Explorers and so-called archives of the colonial administration from the actual occupation. According to him, *the history of pre-colonial black Africa was drawn almost exclusively from the conventional sources of ancient and Arab sources* <sup>12</sup>

These sources are said to be more important in that they are capable of shedding light on the biggest shadows in the history of Africa and are reestablishing a purely scientific character. Generally, the pre-colonial history of African peoples is compiled in archives, travel stories and those of the press. All these writings on the life of the African peoples of before or that of the colonized peoples are today scattered in all the corners of the world. However, it should be noted that the documents of the pre-colonial history of the African

peoples still remain to be discovered. Thus according to SékéneModyCissoko: *Historians must continue unabated, the "struggle for history" by showing that Africa was in the beginning of the story ... that the continent experienced all the experiences humanity, in all areas of the mind and matter* <sup>13</sup>

## 6. THE SOCIO-CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE CONGO AND KNOWLEDGE OF WORLD HISTORY

<sup>12</sup> D. Cheick Anta, op. cit, p.202

<sup>13</sup> SekeneModyCissoko 1981: The responsibilities of the African historian, Dakar, pp.4-5

The writing of the history of pre-colonial Africa in general and that of the Congo, in particular, is an indisputable necessity, a major challenge for Congolese historians. For the mastery of the Congolese human past is a true part of the constitution of universal history. The more writings on the values and cultures of the Congolese people, the more light there is in all aspects of history in general. On this basis, it would make the past of the Congolese peoples a major stake in the drafting of the history of the world. The history of the African continent is built from its different foci of civilization, including that of Congo-Brazzaville. It will be well written only when one has mastered the organization and the functioning of the different societies that make up this great ensemble. It is in this capacity that knowledge of the Palaeo Congolese environment is necessary to gather the true information. Or to know the truth about all the vexatious remarks made by European researchers like Hegel who in the nineteenth century conceived a negative historiography on the African past, or the Negro inhabiting this part of the earth would remain indefinitely on the margins of the primitivism of the anthropology of Boas, the overestimation and superiority of the white man in relation to the African nigger supported by Levy-Bruhl and Levi-Strauss had difficulties to recognizing that the Congo before the colonial penetration counted chiefdoms and kingdoms.

## 7. ORAL SOURCES, AN UNAVOIDABLE LANDMARK IN THE WRITING OF CONGO'S PRE-COLONIAL HISTORY

Traditional Congo society, predominantly inhabited by Bantu and indigenous peoples, had a form of the diversified political organization before the colonial period. Undoubtedly the pre-colonial Congo was organized around kingdoms and chiefdoms. All traditional circles had an organization at the family, lineage, village and kingdoms levels. At the head of each structure was a patriarch, a former wick was the valid representative of the ancestor from members of the lineage, its mission is well defined by Joseph Itoua: *This is an older responsible for supervising chiefs Family members and their members. He protects them morally and spiritually. He married family members and helped them get married. He participated with other heads of lineage to the management of clan heritage and contributes to the protection of the village* <sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> J. Itoua, 2007: The Mbosi in Congo people and civilization, Paris, Harmattan, p.19

It is important to point out that the territory on which the village is erected is a property of the first founder. All the inhabitants of this village are from his clan and are subject to a fee as well as abroad as stated Pierre Vennetier: *the land chief collects some royalties in kind, fish, a piece of slaughtered animal, whose importance varies with circumstances. They are highest when the game was killed by foreign fighters clan ...* <sup>15</sup>

Chiefdom was entrusted to the older owners of the land *ngantsié member*. By his qualities, his generosity, his weight, his intelligence, and his wealth, the pretended chief was chosen either by voting or by co-optation, or he acceded to the throne by automatic devolution. And this right to vote was reserved only for the members of the council of elders, an instance of the chiefdom responsible for authenticating the legitimacy and the nature of the power of chief.

The chief has to watch over the laws and customs of the traditional society, for more efficiency here faced in spirituality thanks to the different retreats.

The Congo experienced kingdoms along the Atlantic coast, in the savanna zone of southern and central Congo (the Loango kingdom, the Kongo kingdom, the Teke kingdom). In these traditional circles, the people had a sense of respect for their authorities. The person of the king assumes a formidable character because of numerous rites to which he is constrained. Teke in the Congo - Brazzaville, these rites was done through specific practices such as palm wine libation *Mali has mba* by the future King *onko* on the tomb of King "deceased". While among the Kongo, maintenance ritual and the inauguration of the king to the rhythm of the traditional dance *Mbasa* gave the sovereign representative supernatural power, all its magnificence, and zeal to take possession of his reign.

In the pre-colonial Congolese society, there were three systems of kinship: the matrilineal system, the patrilineal system, and the so-called bilinear system. Since parenthood is a link between individuals within the family, it constitutes a system of social identification. In pre-colonial times, the man belonging to the group of individuals descended from a common ancestor and who has a head of the family had inalienable value and dignity.

<sup>15</sup> - P. Vennetier quoted in J. Itoua: The Mbosi Congo: People and civilization, op.cit, p 122.

That is why in traditional Congolese society, a topic provided to *Kifumu*, as a set of special moral and intellectual qualities that make an individual believes could apply to the political power of the prince.

The oral tradition is a true source of information even if the writings remain complementary documents in historiography. For the writing of the history of the people and the African civilization, many African authors take the oral tradition for a respectable historical source in spite of its complexity. Indeed, in Africa to acquire the most reliable information, it is important to get closer to resource persons holding the truth about the facts, the object of historical research. One of the characteristics of the oral source is that the information held by the class of elders translates from mouth to ear. And this information results either from an experience

experienced by the elder himself or from that of his ancestors. The place par excellence for the transmission of knowledge or wisdom is the *Mbongui*, where the company's virtues are taught: sharing, a sense of compassion, issues of justice, reconciliation and forgiveness. According to AdolpheTsiakaka:

*The Mbongui is the central place in the villages, meeting place for men but also place of encounter with ancestors. There, it deals with diverse issues without the defined order of the day, with broken stones. Often the most important problems are raised and solutions are proposed in turn. All that said nourishes the experience of young people present and sometimes certain words are required for them to serve their education*<sup>16</sup>

However, this possibility of positive and valorising the civilizations of Black Africa does not in any way aim at boycotting the scope of written documents and any other initiative aimed at the logic of progress. Traditions, rituals, habits and customs were the main characteristics of African society in the pre-colonial period. The socio-cultural values, the old man, remain points of reference that can help in the drafting of Congo's pre-colonial history. Oral tradition is one of the sources of information, and the old guardian of ancestral values is the authentic source, despite their distortion from generation to generation and their lack of dating, for history is first and foremost its time.

<sup>16</sup> - A. Tsiakaka, 2010: Dialogue at the heart of the life of Cardinal Emile Biayenda, AAE, Strasbourg, p. 17

## 6. Methodological Approach to the History of the Congo

The knowledge and success of writing the history of the Congo deep from the pre-colonial era require the new approach, which gives the researcher the possibility to increase his knowledge by the discovery of the most effective method in his investigation. Here we allude to the interdisciplinary which must be placed in the service of historical writing. Interdisciplinary is a new method of writing history. It is a solution for researchers who for lack of written documents, at least for African historiography are experiencing difficulties in their investigation. To this end, the writing of African history should use this methodological approach so that the scarcity of written documents is no longer a factor that could jeopardize the work of Congolese historiography. Through interdisciplinary, the historian draws from the other sciences the materials necessary for successful research.

The NdingaMbo professor seizing the merits of interdisciplinary in the writing of the history of peoples and African civilization in general and Congo-Brazzaville in particular states: *Our method also opens to the exact sciences such as mathematics and many historians use analytical*

*techniques that use Themes. This story made so fashionable today is*<sup>17</sup>

This new vision of historical data initiated by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929 should be unanimous by historians. In the absence of the written documents, one uses the methods of the neighboring sciences and, this allows the researchers to enrich themselves in methodology. This will put an end to the intangibility of the limits separating the different fields of investigation. This cross-disciplinary methodological option implies the co-operation and integration, in scientific research, of disciplines likely to help the researcher achieve the expected result. Henceforth history as a branch of the human sciences will establish a sincere dialogue with the other sciences connected with it.

<sup>17</sup> - AC NdingaMbo 2003: For a history of the Congo - Brazzaville, Methodology and thinking, Paris, L'Harmattan. P.22

Interdisciplinary, therefore, requires close contact and the constant exchange of services between disciplines. Since the possibility of writing the pre-colonial history of Congo-Brazzaville is envisaged, it is the responsibility of young Congolese researchers to take an interest in this project in order to trace the traces of their faraway ancestors. If yesterday the absence of historical literature in Africa was an insurmountable obstacle to a thorough knowledge of the past of African black peoples, nowadays researchers using this new approach can safely evaluate their own most authentic historical sources. The new method of writing the history of Africa aims at the interpenetration of domains. To this end, history conceived as a scientific discipline can draw on oral traditions, sociology, anthropology, ethnology, archaeology, linguistics and other disciplines capable of encouraging its elaboration. At the same time, NdingaMbo says onomastics can be used in the reconstruction of the human past and defines that: *Onomastics is the science of names, including place names involved or science sites and places, the ethnonym science or group names of Men and anthroponymy or science of names of persons. She thereby providing a valuable material, not only for linguists but also to other developments of specialists and contacts between cultures and civilizations.*<sup>18</sup>

Today with the involvement of new information technologies and communication, we can say that an opportunity is given to researchers to carry out their investigation.

In the search for the drafting of the pre-colonial history of the African people in general and the Congo in particular, the credit goes to the great efforts of Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch who managed to create since 1929 the Annals School to promote the practice of total history. In Brazzaville, the opening of the historical school by Michel Marie ThéophileObengaetc bring great innovations in the drafting of the African pre-colonial history in general and especially Congolese. The use of two sources (oral and written) facilitates the African historiography task.

<sup>18</sup> AC NdingaMbo2004 : *Onomastics and history in Congo Brazzaville*, L'Harmattan, Paris, p.9

## 8. CONCLUSION

The problem of oral sources in the writing of history is a real update that enables African researchers to be aware of their importance. Reflecting its origins in order to discover the most credible truth of the cultural values of his ancestors is one of the great challenges of our investigation.

Despite some limitations that oral sources may have especially about his scientific authority and lack of accuracy in dating events, the success of writing the pre-colonial history of Africa in general and the Congo, in particular, requires African historians, the African equipment.

In writing the true history of the African peoples, oral sources remain indispensable. The assertion of cultural identity or Congolese, the definition of pre-colonial history of Congo – Brazzaville result of a long work requiring updating of the following prerequisites: the search for the ideal of African identity through the working awareness; free themselves from the inferiority complex among them by intellectual sagacity; creation of intellectual movements or class of African elites responsible debate on the major themes of the historical heritage, both at continental and national levels; the mobilization of all national expertise to build a just humanity, true and authentic; use of interdisciplinary in the writing of African history;

Use cautiously with dexterity oral sources to avoid falling into a confusing traditionalism, written to by the custom and traditions observed in families that serve as benchmarks for future generations.

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