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Collective Memory and *Oriki* in the Context of Owu Origin, Southwest Nigeria

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Introduction

This paper is a product of fieldwork at Orile-Owu, southwest Nigeria in 2011 when the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria carried out a field school at Orile-Owu. The general research theme of the fieldwork was *Migration and Settlement: Contested Origin and Diasporic Identity of Owu People in Southwest Nigeria*. The specific purpose of the 2011 field school was to attempt, through ethnographic research (from anthropological perspectives), a reconstruction of the Owu history of origin. The choice of the field site was informed by the desire of the faculty, as anthropologists and archaeologists, to participate in and engage with issues bordering on the construction of nationalism and contestations in historical origin and space among the people. Based on this intention the department mobilized staff and students of the department and engaged in a first phase of the fieldwork between May 24 and June 6, 2011 with the intention of exploring the Owu history of origin and the diasporic identity of the people. As in 2011, Owu settlements were found in different states in southwest Nigeria including Osun, Oyo, Ogun and Kwara states. Yet they all claim the same Owu origin. For instance, the diverse groups are still linked to one another

through annual festival celebrations known as the *Anlugbua* Festival and Owu Day. Owu Day is celebrated in October every year on a rotational basis among different Owu communities. It was celebrated, for instance, in Erunmu in 2011 and Owu-Isin in 2010.

While going through the literature on Owu people in preparation for the field school, it became obvious that there are certain unexplained issues and subsequently gaps and at times contradictory positions, which indicate that many questions remain unanswered in the documentation of Owu history of origin (see for instance Mabogunje and Omer-Copper 1971). This confusion remains complex as Owu lacks enough current research attention in comparison with other Yoruba groups. It therefore becomes imperative to engage in ethnography as Malinowski suggested - and fieldworkers need to immerse himself/herself in the culture of the people under study to be able to explain complex cultural practices. In the case of the Owu study, ethnography was conducted in Orile-Owu to ‘poke our minds’ on the question of ‘truth claim’/objectivity of knowledge claims, which has been a major issue in the field of anthropology, the debate which postmodernism has championed. In other words, my intention is to juxtapose the positions as espoused by scholars in the literature (represented by Mabogunje and Omer-Copper 1971), against ‘what the people told me’, including what I ‘observed’ in the field. Substantively, what is known by individuals of Owu is a product of individual and collective memories. This perhaps raises the question of ‘who then holds the truth?’ The question needs to be answered as it will further establish a valid and objective scientific knowledge. Therefore, in this study I have explored these individual and collective memories to generate data on Owu origin. Importantly I have explored the ‘*oriki*’ of the Owu people as a possible clue to finding answers to the questions that form the subject matter of this study. *Oriki*, by definition, is a praise poem among the Yoruba people. I am aware of the problems that surround interpretation in the discipline of anthropology.

As a matter of fact, the very basis of interpretive anthropology, championed in such works as Geertz (1973, 1983) and Marcus and Fischer (1986), is the question of interpretation and the search for objective knowledge. But it must be acknowledged that postmodernism created the space that led to those contentions and debates on local histories as divergent views and positions, *e.g.*, worldviews could be taken into account as possible alternative ways of viewing the reality of local history. The implication of this is that prior to this period, modernism, with its projection of the monolithic rationality inherent in Western science, was used to mirror all human societies. For Marcus and Fischer (1986: 7-16) for instance, the crisis generated in the field of anthropology and other social science disciplines is what they term “crisis of representation”. In the context of this paper however, while recognising this ‘challenge’, I endeavour to contribute to the explanation on the origin and diasporic identity of the Owu people of southwest Nigeria. At the same time, I point out the challenges of relying on individual and collective memory in the search for an authentic history for the production of objective knowledge. My analysis in this study is therefore based on extractions from the literature and examples drawn from field reports, especially as represented in the *oriki* of the Owu people.

Owu Origin and Settlement in Historical Contests

Like many African societies whose histories were late to be documented, a lot of contestations exist in different sections of Yoruba. The historical strength of both Ife and Oyo resulted in their histories being taken as representatives of ancient Yoruba kingdoms. Many other Yoruba Kingdoms such as Ijesha, Ede, Igbomina, Ekiti among others that also existed, have not only lost research interest but also kept their information to historical contests. Information about these early Yoruba micro political communities also exists in oral forms and thus creates the question of validity and objectivity. Owu remains an indispensable political community that existed either at the same time or earlier than Old

Oyo. Since old Oyo is less attractive for thorough scientific investigation because it is subjected to serious historical contestations that emanate from elite appropriation of history and oral narratives. There are two domains in this contest.

Contested Issues I: Original Homeland of Owu People

According to Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper (1971), there are two accounts documented in the literature with regard to the origin of the Owu:

1. The first account of the origin of the Owu people was that the eldest of Oduduwa’s children, a princess, who decided to marry a commoner, the father’s priest. The implication was that the child of such a marriage could only acquire royalty by virtue of his maternal descent. For this principle to be broken, therefore, something ‘uncommon’ must take place to change the tradition. The opportunity to change tradition was provided when Owu, as a little child, was playing with his grandfather’s crown and his father jokingly placed the crown upon his head. Unfortunately, when his grandfather decided to take back the crown, the young boy refused to let go. Rather, he cried so uncontrollably that his grandfather, in order to pacify him, instructed that the crown be left with him. Thus the young boy became known as ‘*Asunkungbade*’, meaning ‘he who acquired the crown through weeping’. He later settled at a place between Osun River and Sasa River, which is near the present day Orile-Owu, to avoid conflict between himself and his grandfather and more importantly because two kings cannot rule one kingdom.

2. The second myth according to historical account is that the Olowu was the brother of the first Ooni of Ife. When he was born, it was discovered that he clenched his fist. When the fist was forced open, it was discovered that he had a mark in the shape of a crown imprinted in his hand that was viewed as evidence of his royalty. These two accounts have been used to explain the royalty of the founding father of the Owu people.

Contested Issue II: Dispersal and Return

According to Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper (1971), the possible cause of this dispersal cannot be unconnected to the Yoruba wars in the 19th century. The Owu people in particular were victims of the Bariba invasion of their country in the 19th century. Accordingly, the authors attempted to identify: (i) the original site of the Owu before the dispersal, and (ii) the remnant of that community. From the scholars' account, the original site of the Owu before dispersal was problematic because three existing sites could possibly claim this role. According to these scholars, these are (i) Orile-Owu (ii) Ago-Owu (both sites are close to each other and located about 20 miles southeast of Apomu near present day Ibadan-Ife road [Ago-Owu, they noted, is also known as Owu-Ipole and more recently Owu-Orile] and (iii) Owu-Ogbere, which derived its name from Ogbere in present day Ibadan. They further contend that although identifying the original site of Owu city has remained problematic, "Owu was probably originally in grasslands and the present Owu-Ile near modern Oyo may well be a remnant of the original community" (Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper 1971: 32). These scholars' association of the original site with grasslands was based on the fact that, firstly, farming, which was the major source of livelihood of the Yoruba people, could easily be practiced and cultivated with simple farming tools in this spatial location. Secondly, guinea savannah and grasslands allow for easier movement than in the forest. To further buttress their position, Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper (1971) argued that the Bariba attack of the 19th century is the key to the dispersal of the Owus. This could not be possible if Owu city was located in the deep forest region that "would have been unlikely the object of Bariba attack" (Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper 1971: 35) due to (a) the distance of the forest region to Nupe territory in present day central Nigeria where the Bariba people lived; and (b) its contradiction to other historical accounts such as the livelihood of the Yoruba people. Thus the grasslands could have been more accessible to Baribas. Against these 'speculations', the oral discussions during the fieldwork at Orile-Owu

suggest that one out of these three: Orile-Owu, Ago-Owu and Owu-Ogbere, is the original home of the Owu people from where they later dispersed. The implication is that this position is open to further investigations and is not a close-ended issue.

Methodology

This study was carried out in Orile-Owu in Ayedaade LGA, Osun state, Nigeria between 24, May and 6 June, 2011. Orile-Owu is bounded in the north by Apomu, in the south by Ijebu, in the east by Ile Ife and in the west by the Sasa River (see Figure 1). The community is organized around kinship lines with six compounds identified as royal families. The people of Orile-Owu are predominantly farmers cultivating such crops as cocoa, palm trees, yams and cocoa yams. At the time of contact, the town had just lost its traditional ruler, His Royal Majesty Oba Moses Olayioye Adedosu Adejobi and his wife Olori Funmilayo Tinuke Adejobi in a ghastly motor accident. Hence, the mood of the community reflected this development. This could have implications for the contents and nature of oral data available to the researchers. Besides, typical of Yoruba society, in a town of six ruling dynasties, the demise of a traditional ruler may mean silent contestations for power and manipulations of narratives to suit the positions of the contenders to the throne. The role of the ethnographer therefore, is to be able to decipher and identify consistencies and contradictions and to be able to establish if possible a near accurate representation and to draw inferences and conclusions.

The methodology of this research is qualitative, and such data gathering techniques as participant observation, focus group discussions and key informant interviews were utilized for data gathering. The *oriki* of the Owu people was in the process extracted as data and subsequently interpreted. Documentary evidence equally provided data for the study. Collected data were analyzed using descriptive and interpretive techniques.

Reports from the Field

From the narratives generated from the field, the first issue that received contradictory responses is the name of the town 'Owu'. For instance, 57% of the informants are of the view that the name 'Òwu' comes from the name of Asunkungbade's mother who was a dealer of 'cotton' meaning 'Òwú' in the Yoruba language. Hence, she was often referred to as 'Ìyá Olóòwú'. This view dominated the oral narratives collected from the field. In line with this, Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper (1971) postulated that the ancestral home of Owu is Owu-Ile in the savannah. Inherent in this view is that the place currently referred to as Orile-Owu was originally in the savannah. This supports the notion that 'Òwu' means cotton' as cotton actually grows in the savannah. However, as the town is currently covered by a natural lowland tropical rain forest vegetation with elements of secondary forest regrowth, a response to man-made deforestation resulting from fuel-wood production, road construction, soil quarrying and traditional farming practices among the people, it evidently contradicts these scholars' position that Owu was originally in the savannah. On the other hand, 'Iya olowu' could mean 'the mother of Owu'. Here, Owu could mean the name of a person, probably the founder or the ruler of Owu town. In that case, reference is made to the mother of the founder or ruler of the town. Another version is that Oówú is iron slag from blacksmithing. Since Asukungbade was a blacksmith, one of the earliest occupations in Yoruba land, his mother could be referred to as Iya Olówú, that is, the mother of the blacksmith.

Besides, Owu, examined in the context of Yoruba morphology, suggests different meanings contrary to cotton. Against these contradictions, it is clear that the search for the meaning of 'Owu' continues and more archaeological, historical and linguistic evidence is needed to throw more light on this. However, we cannot jettison what the people claim they are. That is the basis of the emic approach in ethnography.

The Place of Memory in Owu Origin: Evidence from Owu *Oriki*

According to Adegbirin (forthcoming), *oriki* is "a verbal salute used by the Yoruba to honour their progenitors who often times have become deified" (Adegbirin forthcoming: 34). For Ogunfolakan (2002) *oriki* for the Yoruba people, "plays an important role in the documentation of the oral history and culture of the people", and is embedded in the ancestral history of each family concerned by tracking their history, profession, socio-political background and achievements (Ogunfolakan 2002: 97-98). Ogunfolakan (2002) further argues that *oriki* reminds one of real life incidents, details of which might have been forgotten and are indispensable in the identification, analysis and interpretation of historical landmarks. Barber (1991) contends that *oriki* "are a genre of Yoruba oral poetry that could be described as attributions or appellations", 'a master discourse' and probably the best in Yoruba oral literature. Going further, she notes that they are composed for humans, animals, and spiritual beings and performed in numerous modes and genres. Barber further hinted that *oriki* establish unique identities and at the same time make relationships between beings. They are central components of almost every significant ceremony in the life of the compound and town, and are also constantly in the air as greetings, congratulations and jokes. They are deeply cherished by the owners (Barber 1991: 1).

Similarly Dalysva (2007) points out that "the different sub-generic forms which characterize its form, and its obvious ethnographic and anthropological historicities constitute its thrust and aesthetic peculiarities" (Dalysva 2007: 173). Indeed, *oriki* performs different functions among the people. In a curative role, for example, a mentally derailed person could be cured through the recitation of the lineage *oriki*; a weeping child is pacified through the same act. Awe (1974) concludes that *oriki* can function as historical data for the understanding of the family lineage and their characteristics/personality and even in tracing family patri-lineage relationships. Accordingly, Awe identifies

three types of *oriki* among the Yoruba people.

These are:

- (i) *Oriki ilu* (towns), which deals with the foundation of a town, its vicissitudes and its general reputation among its neighbours;
- (ii) *Oriki orile* (lineages), which gives characteristics of a patrilineage by focusing attention on a few illustrious members of the lineage whose attributes are supposed to typify the main features of that lineage;
- (iii) *Oriki inagije* (individual personalities), which deals mainly with individuals; it could outline these qualities that mark out a person for distinction or it could be a combination of these and his pedigree, in which case some of the *oriki orile* are included.

Awe further notes that *oriki*, as a source of historical data of a people, can throw some light on the understanding of their history. The Owu people have *oriki*, which following Awe's classification, falls into *oriki ilu* and *oriki inagije*, that tell their story of origin. From the field, one of the *oriki* classified as *oriki ilu* as recounted by one of the informants goes thus:

National Anthem of Owu: *Oriki Iseda Ilu.*

<i>Owu l'akoda o o o o o</i>	Owu was the first to be founded.
<i>Owu l'akoda</i>	It is Owu that was first founded.
<i>Be d'Owu</i>	When you get to Owu,
<i>E bere wo</i>	You may ask.
<i>Owu l'akoda oooo</i>	Owu was the first to be founded.
<i>Bie de'Fe</i>	When you get to Ife,
<i>E berere wooo</i>	You may ask.
<i>Owu l'akoda oooo</i>	Owu was the first to be founded.
<i>Bie de'le</i>	If you get home,
<i>E kaa tan wo</i>	try and find out.
<i>Owu l'akoko daa.</i>	It is Owu that was the first to be founded.

An analysis of this praise poem reveals its emphasis on the belief among the Owu people

that Owu is the first to be founded/established. Interviews conducted in the town revealed that the Owu people believe that Owu was the first of the Yoruba kingdoms to declare its independence from the Ooni of Ife, and hence established its own kingdom. They argue that while others were still under the authority of Ooni of Ife, the Owu people had separated themselves into an independent kingdom/entity.

Another Owu *oriki* (presented below) made reference to Ajibosin, who is also referred to as 'Asunkungbade' their founder. The *oriki* presented below represents *oriki Inagije*, that is 'oriki in the honour of personality'. It goes thus:

Oriki II: *Oriki Inagije*

<i>Omo Ajibosin</i>	The son of Ajibosin.
<i>Omo Arowiyi ni njoye</i>	Descendant of Arowiyi who takes chieftaincy title.
<i>Baba won lo f'owo meweewa</i>	Their father received crown with both hands from Orile Owu
<i>gb'oye lorile Owu</i>	The son of Laberejo
<i>Omo Laberejo</i>	The son of Ogun ogunle
<i>Omo Ogun ogunle</i>	The son of he that farts to the high Heaven.
<i>Omo osososo korun</i>	The son of he that has money to perform burial ceremony is Owu-Ileeeee
<i>Omo arowo sesin l' Owu-Ile eeeee</i>	

(Oral Communication, June 2011)

It is interesting that Ajibosin is mentioned in this *oriki*. As a matter of fact Ajibosin is Asunkungbade, the grandson of Oduduwa who received the crown through weeping. Owu is the hometown of Ajibosin.

In the third *oriki*, which is presented below, we have a typical example of a combination of *oriki ilu* and *oriki inagije*. The chant tries to link the origin of Owu to Asunkungbade, and at the same time recounts Asunkungbade's virtues and prowess, making references to his pedigree. It reads thus:

legitimation in the process of social reconstruction of the past. In the context of this paper, collective memory is viewed as (i) personal recollections and articulation of individuals in Orile-Owu of his/her understanding of who they are, what they do and the meanings and significances inherent in all these with regard to their history of origin, (ii) a sum total of the individual recollections that represent the aggregate of what the Orile-Owu people as a collective perceive of themselves, which is consistent with what most informants said at the individual levels of recollection. These are all presented as narratives, and are embedded in the meanings ascribed to artifacts, values, norms, attitudes, rituals, ceremonies, symbols and symbolism.

Memory as an instrument of data collection is not flawless. This understanding implies that while we the ethnographers, search for 'the truth' 'in the mouth' of the Owu people, and try to generate meanings from the monuments, rituals, myths and symbols of the Owu people, we need to be conscious that memory recollection is not sacrosanct as the content of memory is selective. Thus Yerushalmi (1982: 95) noted that while certain memories live on, the rest are winnowed out, repressed, or simply discarded by a process of natural selection, which the historian uninvited disturbs and reverses (Yerushalmi 1982: 95).

Similarly, Bourguignon (2005: 65) rightly cautions that the researcher should note that apart from the selectiveness that characterizes memory as a mode of extracting data, there is also by implication an element of silencing. Societies in the process of constructing their identity tend to select those events that positively present them to the 'Other' as powerful and grandiose, and such virtues that draw admiration, respect and fear from those that interact or hear of them. Conversely, those events that reflect defeat, powerlessness and unviable pasts are repressed and silenced or if remembered at all, are subjected to the position of marginality in the narratives of the people. The implication is that collective memory is subjective and that subjectivity entails exclusion of those parts of our history that reveals our weaknesses as 'inglorious'. Collective

memory is, therefore, prone to manipulations, shaping what is known, is believed in and can project this construct that will contribute in concretizing the accepted and suppressing the unaccepted in the process. Little wonder that memory is often employed as an instrument of political manipulation for acquiring power, and by twisting memory recollections to the advantage of both the bearer of the memory and the researcher. For the Owu people, the Anlugbua Festival symbolizes their collectiveness and constitutes part of that processes of constructing their identity. Through myth-making, Anlugbua has been constructed as symbolic with ritual performances that have also become part of that tradition-making. With tradition meanings are invoked, which the people act upon. But that meaning is made sense of through historical occurrence(s), which the members of the society can identify with either because they bear witness to it, or they inherited it through oral tradition. Whatever the case, the fact is that in agreement with Olick and Robbins (1998: 108), "all meaning frameworks have histories and that explicitly, past-oriented meaning frameworks are prominent modes of legitimation and explanation..." (Olick and Robbins 1998: 108).

Contestation in the context of a study of this nature connotes a form of 'struggle in the terrain of truth' (*cf.* Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 1). Contestation may lead to a possible paradigm shift from the once accepted 'fact' or ideology. In that instance, knowledge may be reproduced and new idea(s) take(s) centre-stage, and the old concept gives way. As Hodgkin *et al.* (2003: 1) rightly note "the focus of contestation, then, is very often not conflicting accounts of what actually happened in the past so much as the question of who or what is entitled to speak for that past in the present". The question then is how can truth be best conveyed and whose voice needs to be heard as representing the authentic voice and speaking the fact? While Hodgkin *et al.* (2003: 1-2) contend that "[m]emory is still alive and active, still charged with the weight of these contests, and it is to memory that one should turn in order to reveal 'what really happened', they seem to underestimate the fact that memory is built within a social context and as such, certain facts

can be undermined while others are promoted. In view of these contradictions in this battle for truth claims in Owu, no discourse/discipline can be said to possess exclusive rights to 'the truth' or the facts because even those facts are to be interpreted and interpretation is problematic. Marcus and Fischer (1986:7-16) acknowledge the challenging dynamics of interpretation in what they describe as a 'crisis of interpretation'. One challenge which history has despite its pretense of objectivity is the fact that history has a "posture of distance from meaning and relevance" (Olick and Robbins 1998: 110). In other words history, in attempting to document what it claims to be truth, discards meanings and ultimately becomes irrelevant. Memory is treated as minimally significant and thus poorly rated in historiography. The implication is that history perceives the object of its study as lacking in its ability to 'speak'. This is what Olick and Robbins (1998: 110) term history's "posture of distance from meaning and relevance". In the same vein, the knowledge produced by historical account can be assumed to be a relative knowledge in the sense that it was based on certain premises made available to the historian, for instance, as documented in the archival materials, which on its own is also affected by who did the writings and what was his/her positionality. A typical instance is what obtains in the colonial accounts of Africa's experience of colonialism, where the focus is how Europe conquered Africa, which is against the current trend where the focus shifts to Africa's resistance to colonialism; a case of telling the same story from different perspectives, and consequently generating different answers and meanings.

Back to collective memory and *oriki*, traditions are often used to secure political power; hence, traditions can be distorted, shaped according to the way they can promote group interest. When we juxtapose the business of historiography against the place of collective memory and *oriki* in the recollection and construction of a people's past, including their historical origin, what plays out is Halbwachs' (1992) conclusion that history is dead memory, a way of preserving pasts to which we

no longer have an 'organic' experiential relation. On the surface, this understanding of the distinction negates the self-image of historiography as the more important or appropriate attitude toward the past; history's epistemological claim is devalued in favour of memory's meaningfulness (Halbwachs 1992 as cited in Olick *et al.* 1998:110).

However, with regard to the Owu history of origin, the fundamental question is why these discrepancies in the documentation on the Owu history of origin? And why do Owu people echo "*Owu la koko da*"? meaning "Owu was the first to be founded"? For this researcher therefore, in the search for the truth, whether in history, science, politics, anthropology etc., there is the pursuit of and claim to objectivity (from the point of view of the object). And in this claim to objectivity we all come into the discourse through our own lenses or worldviews, theoretical frameworks, pedagogical orientations and the like. This readily presents our investigations from a point of view, more so that the facts in contention are the product of history and culture. The question therefore is, can anyone be objective in the true sense of the word? Or are our research programmes not coloured or tinted by our theoretical positions, our presuppositions, the dictates of our disciplinary pedagogy or already existing 'accepted truth'? More importantly, as anthropologists, we rely on the people's perspective and at times pose our own meanings, our own perspectives while trying to make sense of what we believe they do. As I stated earlier, this perspective can be tinted to suit the perceived and the best interest of the knower/observer at a point in time. This is exemplified in the privileged position given to Anlugbua in the people's narrative more than Ajibosin/Asunkungbade. This is the question that is troubling on 'truth claims' with regard to Owu history of origin and the reliance on memory in the search for 'objective truth' in a study of this nature in any community.

Conclusion

As has been elucidated in the discussions above, there is the need for us to realize 'the poli-

tics of historiography'. Historiography, even when it invokes memory, does so as a mechanism for political manipulation. That notwithstanding, as Adesina (2012: 32-33) pointed out, "[t]he knowledge of history gives people a collective sense of corporate achievement and thus enlarges the personality of each member beyond the self". While certain issues are given prominence and 'certified' as historical facts, others are excluded from the discursive arena by virtue of the politics of knowledge production. This is a reality that we are bound to encounter and a challenge that will constantly confront us in our quest. Emerging from our study in Owu land so far is a truism, namely, that both historical and ethnographic accounts do not seem to agree on many areas with regard to this issue. Neither can ethnographic account claim to be in possession of the 'prized truth'. Nevertheless, these are the bases and necessities for the continued search for the 'truth'. We must, however, bear in mind that, as Bourguignon cautions, the past has consequences. The victims may be gone and soon will the last of the survivors. The next generation now questions and seeks to explore what has been silenced if not forgotten (Bourguignon 2005: 84).

Finally, historiography and ethnography can coalesce in the search for the Owu history of origin rather than for each to view the other with suspicion and accuse the other of denying the facts. Nevertheless, one may be nearer the truth than the other. If at the end of this long-term project, we are able to arrive at *providing more information* (emphasis mine) with regard to Owu history of origin and its diasporic identity, we have then contributed to the understanding of a people and their world. The study of Owu history of origin must certainly involve disciplines other than archaeology and cultural anthropology. Linguistics, history, philosophy, and such disciplines in humanity need to be involved in the search for a people's origin and diasporic identity. The one that confronts us at the present is Owu history of origin and diasporic identity.

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