

International Scene

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Oral Records in Senegal

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Abstract: Oral records are an important source for the study of history in Senegal. As early as 1935 the French colonial government recognized the need to record the native oral traditions, but acting on those intentions had to wait until after independence in 1960. The Cultural Archives of Senegal, the Center for the Study of Civilizations, the Primary Institute of Black Africa, and the National Archives of Senegal all collect and conserve oral records, but practice has preceded theory and there is no national plan to define areas of responsibility and no agreement on uniform practices. The author describes current holdings and practices and advocates the development of a coherent policy to ensure the collection, preservation, and use of oral records.

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THE ELEVENTH INTERNATIONAL ARCHIVAL Congress held in Paris on "new archives" (22-26 August 1988) demonstrated the differences that exist among countries in their collecting, processing, and promoting of oral records. These differences are now well known, but the characteristics of national policy in various countries regarding archival management of the spoken word deserve to be investigated more thoroughly. In this regard, Senegal is a good subject for study.

Senegal During the Colonial Period

The French took possession of Senegal from the English in 1816. They installed a modern administration directed by a governor who represented the central government in Paris. By 1895, the territory conquered by the French in West Africa had become so extensive that Paris decided to create a new administrative unit called French West Africa. French West Africa included eight territories: Mauritania, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Guinea, Dahomey (now Benin), Sudan (now Mali), Niger, and Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). The headquarters were in Dakar and the administration was directed by a governor-general. In 1913, the official archives of French West Africa was established to serve the colonial administrative organization.

The Committee for Historical and Scientific Studies of French West Africa existed as early as 1912. However, it was not until the 1930s that new intellectual winds, marked by debates on African culture, began to infuse French West Africa. This led to the establishment in 1938 of the French Institute of Black Africa (IFAN) which was organized to conduct research in the human and natural sciences for this entire region. It was in this climate that Governor-General Jules Brévié, who was interested in intellectual matters, requested the printing of circular no. 175 of 2 May 1935. This

circular urged the collecting of documents that would aid the writing of African history. This history would be based on three sources. First, for the history of colonization, the governor-general mentioned "historical documents of the pacification" (such as diaries from outposts and frontier regions and reports of the conquests). "Native documents" would constitute the second source. The circular stated that "it is necessary to try to understand African history from the native perspective, from an internal point of view in some way. . . . It is certain that among the letters written by the Muslims one can find unedited accounts that will prove a great aid for our understanding." The third source would be "native oral traditions transmitted by generations of the elderly, of story-tellers, and of wandering minstrels. It is in these traditions, in these stories, sometimes romanticized, idealized, or transformed in the manner of epic legends that all of the historical substance of native peoples is deposited."¹

The governor-general insisted on the necessity of collecting these traditions before they disappeared or lost their meaning. Collecting was to be done by teachers, who had the double advantage of knowing French as well as the languages of their own country. They would work among "the elderly and wandering minstrels known for their knowledge of times past" and among those who know "the annals and records of the tribes." Teachers should take care to "record and translate the accounts with scrupulous exactitude. Works of criticism and interpretation would follow later on."²

In this circular of 1935, Governor-General Brévié had clearly established a method for the collecting of oral traditions. However, it addressed neither the problems of

¹Archives nationales du Sénégal (ANS). Circular no. 175 of 2 May 1935 from the Governor-General, Jules Brévié.

²Ibid.

conservation nor of use. What is more, it did not produce results.

A few years later, in 1947, Marguerite Verdat, a paleographer and archivist responsible for archives and documentation at IFAN, resumed the process of collecting oral traditions. Deeming it essential "to save elements of history that are menaced with disappearance before having been written down," she decided to collect legends, history, and genealogies.³ With this in mind, she sent a questionnaire to the commanders of local "cercles" (regional administrative units), asking them to list the names of traditional chiefs, notable families, holy men, wandering minstrels, local traditions, and the name of the spoken language.⁴ During visits to French West Africa, she became involved in this collecting effort herself. She had a plan to set up "a general index card catalog of traditional sources of Africa" with an entry for names of persons, subjects, and places.⁵

The regional commanders, consumed by administrative tasks, gave little attention to Verdat's questionnaire. In 1948, she had to leave French West Africa without seeing her project accomplished. The collecting of oral records during the colonial period ended at this point. It would be necessary to wait for independence for the spoken word to claim its own legal rights.

Archival Management of Oral Records in Senegal Since Independence

Senegal gained its independence from France in 1960. Like other newly independent African countries, it was preoccupied with the economic and social development

of its people. However, many Senegalese government leaders realized that, in the words of President Léopold Sédar Senghor, "culture is at the beginning and at the end of development."⁶ Thus, not surprisingly, cultural policy became a subject of interest. The spoken word was presented as "a fundamental aspect of blackness" ("une donnée de la Négritude") that should be used because, as President Senghor later said, "it will permit us to study the inner life of Africa in a way which is consistent with our African Negro perspective."⁷ However, this interest shown by the government was not sustained by one cohesive policy. The four institutions described here, having different objectives, decided to dedicate all or part of their efforts to the archival treatment of the spoken word.

The Cultural Archives of Senegal. Following the World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar in 1966, the government of Senegal signed an agreement with the French Office of Scientific and Technical Research Overseas to create a cultural archives of Senegal.⁸ The Cultural Archives, according to decree no. 76-1021 of 14 October 1976, supports the goals of Senegal's Ministry of Culture and has as its mission "the world-wide collecting and archival management of the various forms of expression of Negro-African civilization in order that elements of their original structure may be conserved."⁹ Herbert Pepper, then head of the Center for the Collection of Gabonese Traditions in Libreville, was appointed to administer the Cultural Archives. A French ethnomusicologist and composer of Senegal's national anthem, Pepper had already published a book in 1960 entitled *Manuel*

³Mary Niles Maack, "A History of Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centers in Senegal from their Beginnings to 1975" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1978), 95.

⁴The chief of an administrative region known as a "cercle" was called "commander." The territory was divided into "cercles" which themselves were divided into subdivisions and cantons.

⁵Maack, "A History of Libraries in Senegal," 7.

⁶Speech by President Léopold Sédar Senghor, Dakar, 19 May 1980.

⁷Ibid.

⁸ANS. Centre de Documentation. Dossier Archives Culturelles. Agreement of 1967 between the government of Senegal and ORSTOM.

⁹*Journal Officiel du Sénégal* (JORS) 4529: 1690.

du Collecteur—Archiviste d'Expression de Culture Orale Négro-africaine in which he explained his theory of "global collecting."¹⁰

The Cultural Archives has focused on the ethnic groups of Senegal. In so doing, it has been able to collect sources on fourteen ethnic groups apparently chosen according to the degree of interest in them. Its goal was to collect any material which might make the cultural environment of selected populations better understood. It has linked evidence of material culture by collecting not only the spoken word recorded on tape or phonographic records but also ceremonial gatherings and cultural facets captured in photographs, slides, or film.

Specialists who know the language and culture of the ethnic group do the collecting. In general, for each month in the field it takes three months for the cataloging and transcription of the recorded data. Each tape is transcribed and eventually translated into French.

Each inquiry is cataloged in the following way:

- the name of the ethnic group
- the heading (scenes of planting, healing, baptism, etc.)
- the subject covered (history, religion, art, education, etc.)
- the genre (myths, legends, stories)
- the date of the document
- an indication of the place
- the group to which the document belongs
- the title of the document
- the type of recording device

In addition to this description, the documents are given classification symbols to indicate if the format is magnetic tape (BO, for "original tape"), film (FI), slide (DI), or black and white photograph (NB). These

abbreviations are followed by the year and numerical order in which documents arrive at the Cultural Archives. Thus, "BO 7001" would be the first entry on magnetic tape for the year 1970.

In addition to collections gathered by employees of the Cultural Archives, there are also copies of tapes, slides, and film donated by local and foreign researchers who have conducted their own field studies.

At present the Cultural Archives include 6 ethnographic films, 26 video films, 9,000 black and white negatives, 3,521 slides, 1,689 audio tapes, and 250 audio cassettes.

The Center for the Study of Civilizations. The Center for the Study of Civilizations was created in 1972. Like the Cultural Archives, it is attached to the Ministry of Culture. The center's mission is the study of the interrelationship between language and culture, the development and goals of the humanities in Africa, the study of the imaginary world, and the promotion of cultural life among the people. It works to collect oral literature and to study modes of traditional expression dependent upon the spoken word. Researchers attached to the Center do the collecting. Since 1973 it has published the review *Demb ak Tey*.

A number of years ago, the minister of culture, aware of the overlap between the activities of the Cultural Archives and those of the Center for the Study of Civilizations, envisioned combining these organizations into one national center for oral traditions. This project was begun but a unified national center has not yet been created.

The Primary Institute of Black Africa (IFAN Cheikh Anta Diop). The French Institute of Black Africa became the Primary Institute of Black Africa in 1966 (the acronym, IFAN, was retained). In 1987, it added "Cheikh Anta Diop" to its formal name, honoring an eminent researcher there. At the institute, the Department of Literature and Civilization and the Department of Islamic Studies collect oral records. In

¹⁰Herbert Pepper, *Manuel du Collecteur-Archiviste d'Expression de Culture Négro-africaine Recueillie selon une Méthode Audio-visuelle* (Libreville: ORSTOM, 1960), 100.

the former case, the department gathers material from students, researchers, or knowledgeable informants close to those who know the oral epics, accounts, stories, songs, or, in short, the literary texts. Collecting is made on cassette recordings. Each tape is transcribed and the documents are classified by language and literary form and are described in a general catalog with the titles of the tapes. At present, the department has approximately 1,500 cassettes which it preserves. The Department of Islamic Studies collects among Muslim scholars. The researchers administer the collections themselves.

The institute's library has received copies of tapes from local and foreign researchers who have conducted research in the field. These include the David Robinson and the James Johnson collections, which were compiled by two American researchers working on Fouta-Toro. Their collections have been mentioned in the institute's bulletin.¹¹ The Johnson collection is composed of copies of tapes recorded in the region of Podor in 1967 and 1968; those of Robinson were recorded at Matam and in the region of Dakar in 1968.

Typed French translations accompany the tapes. The catalog includes the following information:

- the name of the informant (when there are many informants from the same village at the same session the name of the village is used)
- the place of recording
- the date of recording
- the origin or social class of the informant
- the surroundings in which the session was recorded
- the language
- the subject or subjects discussed

For example, the following title can be found in the Johnson collection: BA (Demba Donde). (prominent farmer) at Gamadji on 29 November 1967 in Pulaar. Subject: the dynasties of Fouta; the separation of Toro from Fouta; the relationship that Toro has with Fouta and Dimar.

This collection is open to all researchers authorized by the institute. However, no publication of the interviewee's text is permitted, as a whole or in part, without the authorization of Johnson or Robinson. Other local and national researchers have also deposited copies of their tapes at the institute.

The National Archives of Senegal. At the time of independence, the Archives of Senegal was preoccupied, above all, with the protection of the French West Africa archives preserved at Dakar and with the establishment of an archives for independent Senegal. It was not until the 1980s that oral records were even considered and then only in a very timid way. Article 6 of the Archival Law of 2 February 1981 stated that "non-written documents and especially those produced while collecting oral traditions can serve (perhaps even support) national history, whatever their medium, and must be deposited in public archives."¹²

Because only collections of oral traditions relating to national history were retained, this statement meant little. However, the law was broad enough to begin a process which little by little led to the establishment of a department of oral records. As a result, researchers (initially Americans) developed confidence in the National Archives and decided to deposit copies of their recordings there. In this way, Eunice Charles, who wrote a thesis on the former Senegalese kingdom of Jolof, forwarded nine tapes to us that contain many hours of recording. These tapes, in the native lan-

¹¹David Robinson, "Supplément au Fonds Robinson d'Histoire Orale du Fouta-Toro," *Bulletin de l'IFAN*, series B, vol. 32, no. 3 (3 July 1970): 766-69.

¹²*Journal Officiel du Sénégal* 4814 (5 February 1981): 102.

guage, included transcriptions. David Robinson, who studied Islam in Senegal, also gave us seven cassettes regarding El Hadj Malick Sy, founder of the Tijaniya school of Tivaouane.¹³ These cassettes also included transcriptions.

The collection's catalog entries include the name of the collector, the subject discussed, the language of the recording, the date, the original classification code of the recording, the transcription, and the library's classification. For recordings, the archives adopted a classification code using letters that denote the media (Ba for tapes, Ca for cassettes), followed by a numerical order. Transcriptions are treated according to the description standards of ISBD(M).¹⁴

Work to date has been only a temporary solution, but there are encouraging signs that more advanced techniques will soon be applied. In 1987, an archival conservator who was finishing his advanced studies at the Ecole des Bibliothécaires, Archivistes, Documentalistes defended a thesis on the necessity of creating an audio-visual unit for the Archives of Senegal.¹⁵ Also in 1987, the German Cultural Center (the Goethe Institute) at Dakar provided support for a national seminar on "Audio-Visual Materials in the Archives." In July 1988, the conservator began a three-month training course at the German Federal Archives in Koblenz. Subsequently, France arranged a loan for the archives to set up an audio-visual service. Now that the service has been created and will soon be functional, the time may be right to think about the philosophical approach that will guide the archives in its task of preserving the spoken word.

The Theory of Archival Management of Oral Records

In Senegal, the practice of archival management of the spoken word has preceded theory. Many organizations are devoted, entirely or in part, to the collecting and conservation of oral records. Yet, no overall plan has been available to coordinate all of these activities. The Cultural Archives collects ethnographic texts, that is to say, oral texts pertaining to the oral culture of a selected group. Yet, the Cultural Archives also collects information on material culture and holds photographs and films related to material culture. Its mission seems to be a global one.

The Department of Literature and Civilization at IFAN and the Center for the Study of Civilizations are interested exclusively in oral literary texts. The National Archives, for the moment, subsidizes the production of collections of oral traditions. "Oral tradition" is understood as "past remembrances orally transmitted which are the product of the activities of a dynamic culture."¹⁶ These oral testimonies concern the past of one or many people that are made the object of a recording across a temporal chain.

However, none of these organizations is currently concentrating on oral history, i.e., collecting of oral testimonies concerning recent periods of history that might complement existing written sources. Life stories are certainly a part of oral history but so are interviews about social conditions in recent history.

Thus, in present-day Senegal no precise definition can be given for oral records. Legislation is mute on this subject. It seems that oral records include at least the following: studies of oral history, ethnographic texts, oral literary texts, and collections of oral traditions. One should probably add

¹³Tijaniya is a Muslim brotherhood founded in Algeria by Cheikh Ahmed Tijani (1737-1815).

¹⁴ISBD (M): *International Standard Bibliographic Description for Monographic Publications* (London: IFLA Committee on Cataloguing, 1974).

¹⁵Ababacar Diop. 1987. "L'Audiovisuel aux Archives du Sénégal." Dakar, Ecole des Bibliothécaires, Archivistes, Documentalistes.

¹⁶Jan Vansina, "De la Tradition Orale," *Annales du Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale* 36 (1961).

the following to the list: discourses, conferences, debates, round table discussions, and other types of activity for which a sound recording has been produced. Radio and television transmissions and correspondence and instruction recorded on the Dictaphone could also be included. Also, one should probably include written documents that give accounts of historical facts or oral traditions since, as Jan Vansina has said, "an oral testimony which has been transcribed remains nevertheless the product of oral tradition just as an oral testimony with no transcription."¹⁷

No consensus has emerged to determine who has the responsibility for collecting. At the Cultural Archives, "oral archivists" (ethnomusicologists, cultural advisors, and researchers affiliated with the institution) do the collecting. At the National Archives, collecting is the responsibility of researchers for the time being, because archivists there are content with the subsequent use and conservation of these records.

This has led to a system of specialization. Archivists are trained in conservation, but they are less knowledgeable about collecting, not having been educated in this field. By contrast, although researchers have been eager collectors, they have proven to be poor conservators. They have been preoccupied with using the collections that they have gathered and with jealously keeping them in their own possession, either for their own work or that of their students. Archivists must begin a dialogue with researchers to provide them with the basic knowledge necessary for handling oral records. At the same time, future archival courses must take into account questions posed by the collecting and management of the spoken word.

No uniform methodology for treating oral records has appeared in Senegal. At IFAN and at the Cultural Archives, a catalog pro-

vides bibliographic description. Sound recordings are described like books. The title of the tape, the language, the form, the date of recording, the place, and the name of the informant as well as other characteristics of the informant are entered in the catalog. No document is associated with its provenance. The Cultural Archives has a classification system that allows the identification of each document placed in the archives. By contrast, IFAN uses a filing system in which researchers from the Department of Literature and Civilization retrieve the material themselves, but access is difficult for the uninitiated. No rules for limiting access have been adopted or even anticipated. At the National Archives no oral archival collections have been accessioned, either under a special arrangement of deposit or in the usual way through a gift agreement. In general, isolated documents have found their way into the archives. They have been treated as library and archival documents at the same time. We must, in the near future, come to an understanding with all those involved regarding the necessity of uniform methods of treating oral records.

We must also be concerned with conservation. Everyone, including those without the means to address the problem, recognizes that oral archives require special conditions for preservation (a temperature of 13°C to 18°C with a relative humidity of 45 percent). It has also been established that, in the interest of good conservation practice, one should maintain an original and two copies. The original, marked "original," is preserved in a place other than where the copies are stored. This practice maintains security for the document. The first copy, which is marked "first copy," serves the reference needs of the staff and the second copy, also marked with a descriptive label, is used by patrons.

If there is any consensus regarding preservation practices, it is that proper conditions are far from being fulfilled. Tapes at

¹⁷Ibid.

IFAN are stored in a closet which is located in a room without climate controls. The recordings at the Cultural Archives also suffer from the rigors of the climate and from the absence of sufficient funds for duplicating the recordings.

In addition to the fact that material conditions for conservation are deficient, no standard practices exist for transcription. IFAN transcribes the tapes that it records. The Cultural Archives takes three months to transcribe tapes that took one month to collect. It also translates certain tapes into French. One might ask whether it is necessary to transcribe the tapes. Certainly, a good transcription removes ambiguities and a written text is more easily accessible than a sound recording. However, the recording constitutes the original (in so far as an interview is concerned) and all transcriptions alter recordings since laughter, hesitations, and silences are rendered only imperfectly. Transcriptions are expensive and tie up funds at a time when budgets allocated to the institutions are hardly sufficient to fulfill their "traditional" activities.

Up until now, archivists have not had the means to facilitate research, either by increasing microforms or by transcribing medieval documents or legal records from the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries. Researchers have had to adapt themselves to the document at hand. The same may be said of oral records. It behooves researchers to master the techniques necessary for a solid comprehension of the recording process, thereby allowing the archivist the time necessary for archival treatment.

It might be proper to ask if a national plan might be devised and implemented to set up an agency responsible for the collecting of all oral records. Certainly, IFAN, the Center for the Study of Civilizations, and the Cultural Archives each have their own goals. Each has developed a plan designed to meet its assigned objectives within the means put at its disposal. However, this

effluence of dispersed efforts is an obstacle to coherence and kills efficiency. It would make more sense to select a major center that would eventually collect material originally processed by individual centers. This center would be the National Center for the Archival Management of the Spoken Word. Material would be transferred there from the individual centers when it was processed. The National Center would be endowed with human and financial resources that no individual center could muster by itself. At the same time, it could conceptualize and apply a real policy for archival management of the spoken word.

If the plans proposed above are accepted, it will be because everyone agrees on the usefulness of oral records. They are useful to the administration when they have an official nature comparable to recordings of commissions of inquiry duly mandated to shed light on some question. Clearly, they also have informational value. They are just as useful for research in the human and social sciences. But, above all, as the Senegalese minister of culture has said, "they permit us to preserve the traditions of our cultural heritage in the best possible conditions."¹⁸ As products of oral inquiries, they permit us, as F. Raphael said, "to penetrate a milieu and social life inaccessible through written information alone and to provide a voice for history's forgotten. They also permit us to know the point of view of historical actors in a way that can complement written sources. Thus, information can be discovered on the origins of a law, the birth and history of an organization or association, the small but true deeds of history, and the details of daily life."¹⁹

However, these records have a certain number of limitations that should be acknowledged if they are to be used profita-

¹⁸Speech by President Senghor.

¹⁹F. Raphael, *Le Travail de la Mémoire et les Limites de l'Histoire Orale*, 127.

bly. No source is sufficient in and of itself. One should complement oral records with written documents, films, and archaeological finds when they exist. In addition, all oral records include silences, holes, and omissions because memory cannot be faithful or does not always wish to be. As Christophe Wondji said, "one of the obstacles to oral tradition is the selection of facts that leaves in the shadows supposedly insignificant events or those stamped with a seal of secrecy."²⁰ To mitigate this difficulty, it would be advisable to collect multiple versions of the same event. Also, oral records, especially oral tradition, ignore chronology. The absence of chronology makes all orderly attempts at a reconstruction of historical truth difficult or even illusory because chronology provides the depth and the historical perspective.

Finally, oral records have a congenital defect. They are based on the spoken word but "the spoken word is unstable due to its flexibility and natural fluidity."²¹ Oral records are, in general, the product of remembrances and "the person who evokes his memories is no longer the same person who lived them—he reconstructs memories according to his own logic."²²

To this fragility of the spoken word one must add the problem of the authenticity of oral records. What confers authenticity to these records? How can you certify that some interview is from the person cited and that it took place on the date and in the place mentioned? These are questions that our training as archivists of the written word

makes us reluctant to answer. Nevertheless, the notion of authenticity is not absent from oral civilization. For example, the Senegalese chiefs who had to correspond with the governors of Senegal at Saint-Louis and who did not have a stamp for this activity to authenticate their transactions called upon a form of evidence currently used in oral language. In a letter which arrived at Saint-Louis 26 February 1823, Serigne Niomre, Chief of Ndiambour wrote to the governor and to the mayor, "At the time that I arrived in Senegal (Saint-Louis) and where I saw the governor and the mayor, when Serigne Ndiagne and Serigne Debi Gueye accompanied me and when we talked with the governor, that day there the governor complained of a headache which the mayor will remember."²³

Oral records are products of the context in which they were created and all use must recognize that fact. Thus, as Philippe Joutard said, "we must be critical not only of the text received but also of the procedure that allowed it to be received since the intervention of the archivist is evident."²⁴

Senegal invested very early in archival management of the spoken word in order to preserve cultural collections that are fundamental to all economic and social development. However, as often happens, practice preceded theory. Disparate and diverse experiences have led us to more or less happy results. Senegal can reflect on past experiences in order to discover a mutually agreeable path that will assure a coherent policy for the collection, preservation, and use of oral records.

²⁰Christophe Wondji, "La Philosophie et le Développement d'une Source de l'Histoire," *Africa Zamani* 16-17 (1986): 14.

²¹Ibid.

²²Dominique Aron-Schnapper and Danièle Hanet, "D'Hérodote au magnétophone," *Annales; Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 35e année, no. 1 (1980): 195.

²³ANS 13G255. Letter received at Saint-Louis on 26 February 1823. "Serigne" is a Muslim title of authority. Ndiambour is a Muslim province and the chiefs hold the title of "Serigne."

²⁴Philippe Joutard, "Un projet régional de recherche sur les ethnotextes," *Annales; Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 35e année, no. 1 (January-February 1980): 179.