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978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History

Elizabeth Tonkin

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Oral history is already recognised as an important historical resource, and this study looks at how oral histories are constructed and how they should be interpreted. It also argues for a deeper understanding of their oral and social characteristics. Oral accounts of past events are also guides to the future, as well as being social activities in which tellers claim authority to speak to particular audiences. Like written history and literature, orality has its shaping genres and aesthetic conventions. It likewise has to be interpreted through them.

The argument is illustrated through a wide range of examples of memory, narration and oral tradition, including many from Europe and the Americas, and with a recurrent focus on oral histories from the Jlo Kru of Liberia, with whom Elizabeth Tonkin, an anthropologist, has carried out extensive research. She also draws on and integrates the insights of a range of other disciplines, such as literary criticism, linguistics, history, psychology, and communication and cultural studies. Her study points to the importance of crossing the disciplinary boundaries which close off oral productions as 'literary', 'historical', 'traditional' or 'popular'.

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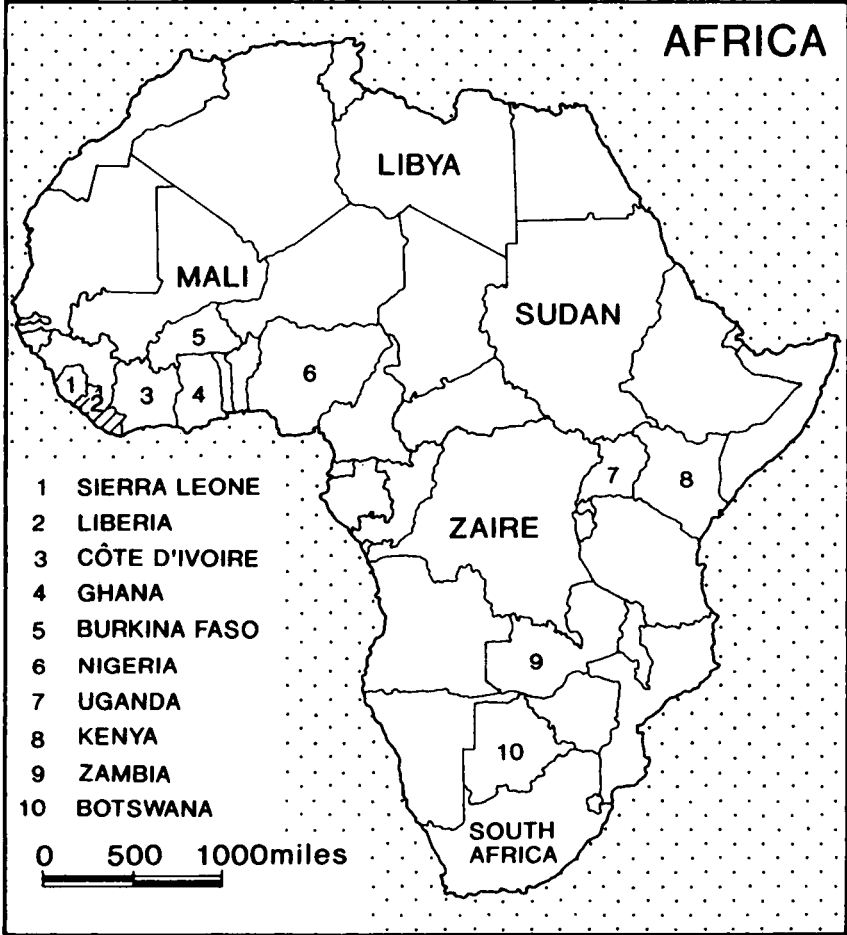
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Map 1. African countries referred to in the text.

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NARRATING OUR PASTS

The social construction of oral history

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Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1992

First published 1992

Reprinted 1994

First paperback edition 1995

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Tonkin, Elizabeth.

Narrating our pasts: the social construction of oral history /
Elizabeth Tonkin.

p. cm. (Cambridge studies in oral and literate culture:)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 40133 X (hardcover)

1. Oral history. I. Title II. Series.

D16.14.T66 1992

907'.2 - dc20 91-12506 CIP

ISBN 0 521 40133 X hardback

ISBN 0 521 48463 4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 1999

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-48463-3 - Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History

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Remembering . . .

**My parents Sylvia and Roy Tonkin, and the victims of
Liberian conflict**

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Maps

- | | |
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| 1 African countries referred to in the text | <i>frontispiece</i> |
| 2 Jlao and its neighbours | <i>page 19</i> |
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Plates*between pages 82 and 83*

- 1 Jlao historians: Gabriel S. Jebo, retired journalist
- 2 Jlao historians: Nimine Gbei, Singer of Sasstown Territory
- 3 Jlao historians: Emmanuel S. Togba and Anna B. Nagbe
- 4 Jlao historians: General Joseph N. Blamo (retired)
- 5 Kru fishing canoes, Sasstown
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- 8 Jlao funeral: beginning a war dance for the dead
- 9 Dividing a gift to the town in eight, for each section of the *bφ*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a book on the social construction of history and how others' lives shape our own consciousness makes one extremely aware of all the influences that have shaped the book itself. There are so many debts I would like to acknowledge. I should first thank the citizens of Sasstown who taught me about their culture and about the significance of oral history. Amongst the many Jiao historians and commentators – some sadly now dead – it feels invidious to choose names, but I remember with especial gratitude just some of them, who are rarely named in the text: Anna B. Nagbe, E. S. Togba, G. S. Jebo, General J. N. Blamo, S. B. Panti, Rev. E. M. Nagbe, Sergeant P. S. Broh, F. 'Marquis' Nagbe, Adolphus B. Kofa, Agatha T. Kofa, and Frank Nimene of Grand Cess.

As I complete this book, Liberians are suffering greatly through war, and many are refugees. The account of Liberia that I give is based on work completed before this unhappy time. It was facilitated by many government officials, and I have received over the years much help from officers and faculty members of the University of Liberia. Financial support came from the (then) Social Science Research Council, the Nuffield Foundation, and the University of Birmingham, where too Chris Wickham commented on all the chapters, Kim Davies, Sue Gilbert and Marlene Wray helped to lick the manuscript into shape, Jean Dowling drew the maps, and Geoff Dowling prepared the photographs for publication. Some passages of the book have already appeared in Tonkin 1988a and 1990a.

And then there are family, friends, teachers, students, colleagues and books: 'You have always been in others and you will remain in others. And what does it matter to you if later on it is called your memory? That will be you, the you that enters the future and becomes a part of it.'

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A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Words in languages other than English are italicised when first cited, unless they are being quoted at length. The conventions of authors' sources are followed. For Kru sources recorded by myself I have adapted the transcribers' orthography, which was developed in the Methodist Church of Liberia Literacy Program, except for most proper names where other versions are in use. Kru words often referred to are not italicised subsequently, and are given anglicised spelling. Kru consonants are given their nearest English form; **l** stands for a 'single flap' which may be heard as **r** or **l**. Kru vowels are open or nasalised: nasals are rendered here by **n**. The vowel system includes 'tight' or 'pharyngeal' vowels: **ɛ** represents 'pharyngeal' **e** (as opposed to 'open' **e** (ɛ) and 'acute' **e**); **ɸ** represents 'pharyngeal' **o** (as opposed to 'open' **o** (ɔ) and **o** as in 'oh').