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Reporting in Nigeria: Observation, Facts and Inference

The impact of Oral Tradition and Social Facts

It is too simple to declare that there is deception and erroneous reporting in Nigeria. Instead, we should be asking, if there is a misunderstanding of how Nigerians report, comprehend and communicate information?

Undoubtedly, ever since data and statistics have been compiled and reported there have been obvious and subtle misunderstandings, misinformation, and, general, confusion, but does this equate to flagrant errors? We must understand and discern the effect between facts, observation, and inference.

Observation

Can we blame the influence of oral tradition or apply Durkheimian thought to the acquisition and reporting of facts? The impact of **oral tradition** is stealthy because facts are often understood and explained by individuals who unknowingly make sense of an event by the stories and tales they have heard through their development within a culture or belief system. Similarly, Émile Durkheim understands the employment of **social facts** is influenced by an individual's beliefs and actions due to sway of the community's preexisting cultural norms and social structuresⁱ. Thus, when an individual is reporting as a witness what are the underlying

influences that they utilize when they explain an event? That is in a current situation, what preexisting social facts or oral traditions are giving meaning and understanding to their reporting of the facts?

In my early years working in the field of relief and development, I visited conflict areas and listened to accounts of atrocities. I compiled statistics and narratives as I listened to stories from the people who endured these conflicts. Yet, in addition to sharing their personal testimonies they often shared other stories that they heard.

For example, during the 2001 conflict between the Tiv and the Jukun people groups (note: the nomadic herdsman Fulani were also involved), there was a story that was shared on both sides of the conflict. The story involved a woman and her infant child. She emerged from a forest after hiding from a fierce battle that destroyed her village and killed everyone except her. She was mortally wounded and in the throes of death, but she is able to present her child to the first person she meets. With her dying breath she has enough energy to present her child and plead with the person to, "Please help this child to live and grow".

I first heard the story from the head of a church denomination on the Jukun side when we discussed the ongoing conflict. Then, proceeding to hear statements from the other side of the conflict, I heard from a local church leader of the Tiv people and he, too, shared the same story but this

Oral Tradition

The stories, beliefs, etc., that a group of people share by telling stories and talking to each other.

Merriam-Webster

Social Facts

"Social facts serve to constrain [peoples] behavior and include not only legal and moral rules in society, but also relationships and behavior patterns of others that affect our day-today lives".

- Michael Hughes

Sociology: The Core,
p.12

Nature of Storytelling

Storytelling is a sensory union of image and idea, a process of recreating the past in terms of the present; the storyteller uses realistic images to describe the present and fantasy images to evoke and embody the substance of a culture's experience of the past.

- Harold Scheub

Encyclopedia
Britannica

time the woman did not have one baby, but was carrying twins.

Could each version of the story actually be true? Sure they could be true but we do not have an eyewitness account, or a photo or a video to document it and say this is what exactly happened. It could be two different stories that occurred on each side of the conflict, or it could be one in the same story but maybe the details of having one baby or twins was misheard. Or finally it could be an allegory of the conflicts. The woman could represent the defeated people group but desiring change and a desire for peace so that subsequent children can grow up and not fear carnage.

There are countless stories that often get told and retold on the same side, on different sides and in general, in public forums. Nigerians, like most Africans, enjoy a story that they can easily understand and find a relationship with, in order to comprehend the situation. In the eyes of the West the stories are false or inaccurate, but that does not mean that they are wrong, rather it just means they are not factual.

Could these stories exist because of the influence of oral traditions? Can they represent a version of the truth that makes it easier to understand and a relationship with their social facts? Ultimately, it is what do we do with these stories, reports and encounters that make them true, or not. I believe we can still use their version of the events but offer an explanation in order to report them, so that we create a relationship between the events and the people.

Like a good story, these accounts should be defined and described through an explanation that makes sense of the situation and not to be interpreted as a tangible factual event. There needs to be an understanding of the individual's social facts, in addition to their oral traditions, and how they impact their account.

Fact

The issue with using oral traditions remains how do we interpret these verbal accounts into factual events? There is a problem when shifting from an oral to a written report. Oral tradition, Bruce Rosenberg aptly explains, that, “In research that compared oral narratives with written versions by the same informant, the oral renderings were more expressive, the written stories more content-focused” (Rosenberg, 80). Thus, understanding this shift attention is needed in how the account is verbally relayed from the individual, who is influenced by social facts and oral tradition, to the written account or formal report.

Similarly, social facts should also be understood in order to present the details in light of the community. Like, sociologists who look for the sources of social facts in a social condition or social context, reporters and investigators should not solely look at an individual’s intent or account but seek a balanced understanding from the source community.

I recall another event that occurred while I stayed in the city of Jos, Nigeria, that other cities had similar stories at about the same time. The story begins with a dispersion of a crowd who are fleeing a common area (e.g. a market, bus station, etc.) because a strange man is touching people and removing their “private parts”. I heard the story from many people but no one ever said that they actually saw a victim or genuinely saw the man touch anyone. In each case they heard it from someone else who heard it from someone else, etc. Yet, in my discovery, it came to light that there was indeed an incident in the market but it had nothing to do with a strange man touching people. It was a swarm of bees that caused havoc as people tried to take cover and reach safety, thus causing a stampede and confusion.

The story was heard throughout Nigeria in various forms and in various locations. I have never met anyone who had their private parts disappear nor seen any accounts (i.e. written, photo, video, etc.) of any person doing the touching, but yet the story continues to circulate and grow. Recently, I came across a video report on YouTube that shows a reporter trying to discover the truth but reveals that this story has been around for many years and people do not have a decisive understandingⁱⁱ.

These types of stories give an explanation to a situation that is occurring in the society. The people hearing about the incident can easily relate to it because they have an oral tradition that showcases similar supernatural events and it makes sense according to certain social facts. It also assists to establish a relationship between the story's incidents and the people who are listening. Is this an allegory of some other situation like infidelity, promiscuity, etc.? Could it mean that we have to be careful of whom we meet, that is, strangers aren't always to be trusted? Or is it proof that supernatural or magic can still happen and we need to protect ourselves either by more powerful magic or having faith in a certain type of religion (i.e. attend prayer or deliverance services, buy magical charms, etc.). The community is questioning itself and citizens are tempted to believe there is a shred of truth somewhere in the story and need to thwart any of these evil assaults.

In Canada, they, too, are seriously taking the influence of oral tradition. Eske Willerslev, a Danish evolutionary geneticist, commented that, "... in the future [I will] pay much more attention to oral traditions among Indigenous people because they could really guide us into understanding where are the interesting problems to be investigated scientifically," (Mortillaro, 2016). Through time ideas, concepts, traditions and culture are passed through generations but

they can immediately influence investigation, incidents and interpretation. Thus, we can't simply take an eyewitness account of an event separated from outside influences.

Inference

Inferences are created when an event is observed and attempts made to be explained by an individual as an interpretation of the facts. These fact statements should be verified by the use of the senses, but inferences are valid if they are established on appropriate and significant evidence. Yet, inferences suggest a possibility, not certainty, and are influenced by experiences, like oral traditions and social facts. The basis for inferences yields assessment, evaluation of situations and enables outlooks.

Whether a witness, or an investigator, reports their understanding of the event, it should be presented by ensuring that their hypotheses survive possible examination as one gathers the evidence. The evidence and facts must be presented in a consequential context, which explains the event or situation, without conjecture or hearsay. It is the responsibility of the researcher, or reporter, to compile the words, ideas and information in light of influences on the individual and, similarly, from the source community.

In a modern society, information is passed almost immediately from one side of the world to the other, or from one person to the next. Thus, we should be able to see an event, report the facts and provide accurate accounts. Yet we still have hearsay, misinformation, and inaccurate reporting infiltrating incidents, conflicts and events. How can events be understood, reported and inferences reached to convey a sense of genuineness and, ultimately, the truth.

We need to come to a common ground where information is conveyed, researched, and reported in the most accurate manner possible. Instead of reporting solely on emotions or

figments of one's imagination, we need to incorporate the truth and maintain a balance on sentiments. Fully understanding that sentiments contribute to inferences because oral tradition and social facts are involved when individuals make a statement or a claim.

Conclusion

If reporters are sent to gather information, of any attack in any town or village, they need to capture eyewitness accounts and present verifiable facts. Too often videos merely show a few reports and a couple of interviews with those affected, but it also focuses on things that could not be seen with the naked eye. It may show locations where someone supposedly died or bled to death. Sure we can imagine or visualize someone dying or bleeding to death but the video did not show any proof or give validity to the story.

Moreso, these reports do not divulge anything about the individual giving the account. Why did they describe the site where someone was brutally murdered even though there is no physical evidence any longer? What oral tradition or social fact is influencing their report?

Reporters and researchers must aspire to bring facts, information and fair representation to a story that will facilitate a relationship between the people, events and the truth. Reports need to be written by those who are gathering information concerning the events so that people can understand and relate to it, but also be representative of the individual and community. It is often the case that those who are doing the reporting are often biased to one side or the other and manipulate any information that they discover towards their view in order to present their view.

As we develop reports and findings based on research, eyewitness accounts and the compilation of facts, we must understand the source and situation. Simply reporting or

documenting what we discover or receive will not provide a balanced assessment or explanation of an event. Being fair and balanced will take time and a comprehensive effort that attempts to understand the individual, not only in their current situation, but also understanding their developmental influences.

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ⁱ We are not discussing what Karl Popper would argue as, “situational analysis”. See William A. Gordon’s “Karl Popper and the Social Sciences” for more insight. Nor are we defining one’s worldview (i.e. their comprehension or outlook on how the world functions). See Dr. David K. Naugle’s discussion on “Worldview: History, Theology, Implications” at <http://www.leaderu.com/philosophy/worldviewhistory.html>

ⁱⁱ The video shows the host is trying to discover the truth, or at least what the interviewee believes or has determined to be the perceived truth. In the end he does not come to any conclusion. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4uog0ezW64>.

