Groundings Undergraduate Academic Journal

University of Glasgow | Glasgow University Union

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Source: Groundings Undergraduate, April 2011, Vol. 4, pp. 9-26

Published by: Glasgow University Dialectic Society, University of Glasgow

ISSNs: 1754-7474 (Print) | 1755-2702 (Online)

Rural African Women: Misrepresentations, Misconceptions, and Towards a Remedy

Hannah Currie

The history of rural African women has been beset by problems. Traditional academic disciplines, in aspiring to a standard of objectivity and validity, have tended towards broad generalisations which obliterate the experiences of marginalised groups. Scholarly obsession with documentary evidence has inadvertently silenced voices in the non-literate world. Meanwhile the socially ingrained proverbs and folktales of Africa contain flawed representations of women. This situation has given rise to warped perceptions which not only conceal the truth but contribute to the subjugation of women. Oral history offers a remedy: by speaking directly to rural African women about their lives, we can give them a voice, gain insights into their pasts, debunk the myths and fill in the gaps in their history, with a view to changing perceptions in both Africa and the western world.

In Woman with Beads, a poem by the African feminist Mercy Amba Oduyoye, the narrator laments: 'I am Woman / I am African... I do not speak much / but I am not without a voice'.[1] Oduyoye recognises that African women have barely any input into the image of themselves that is projected to the rest of the world. Academic

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[1] M. A. Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), iii

'awe of writing' is class- and culture- bound, leaving out huge groups of women who are not part of Western European literate culture.[2] Historical generalisations are typically androcentric; the higher levels of abstraction assumed to present a 'true' picture of 'reality' often portray neither truth nor reality for women.[3] Adding insult to injury are the damaging images of African women fostered by the folktales and proverbs of the continent, and the controversial but popular contention amongst African males that feminism is not relevant to, nor necessary for, Africa. Each aspect of rural African women's identity - rurality, Africanness, femaleness - has presented a barrier to a true and fair history. This article will provide an overview of the manifold issues affecting representations of rural African women, show how these have impacted on real life, and discuss the confused, often negative, perceptions that have arisen as a result. The practice of oral history is suggested as the most appropriate way of addressing these issues and providing insight into 'the real Africa'.

(MIS)REPRESENTATIONS OF AFRICA AND AFRICAN WOMEN: PAST AND PRESENT

African history is the youngest field in the broad domain of world historical scholarship,[4] only emerging within the past sixty years. Prior to independence, historical writing about Africa was dominated by the works of Europeans whose narratives were clouded by their preconceptions and prejudices. Studies referring to 'primitive societies' and 'savage peoples', popularised by anthropologists such as Robert Lowie, were employed to characterise the outlooks of African communities.[5] Such perceptions fed the fantasies of Europe, depicting

[2] A. Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different' in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.) The Oral History Reader, second edition (London: Routledge, 2009), 33; S. N. G. Geiger 'Women's Life Histories: Method and Content' (1986) 11 Signs, 337-8

[3] Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories', 337-8

[4] L. White et al (eds.), African Words, African Voices: Critical Practices in Oral History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 2

[5] I. Okpewho, 'Understanding African Marriage: Towards a Convergence of Literature and Sociology' in D. Parkin and D. Nyamwaya (eds.)

Africa as the 'dark continent' that needed to be brought up to date.[6] A. E. Afigbo wrote a scolding rebuke of colonial approaches:

What is often referred to as the colonial historiography of Africa was simply a display on paper of European, or in any case white, racial and cultural arrogance, an ideological legitimisation of Europe's exploitative presence in Africa, in short a chastening display of the inability of a civilisation (no matter how advanced) to transcend itself.[7]

The tendency to portray African people as 'backwards' can be attributed to Eurocentrism, the belief in the superiority and 'normalcy' of European culture. Though this situation spurred the development of a true African historiography - precisely because it angered African intellectuals and caused them to challenge Eurocentric views - it has nevertheless left a damaging legacy. Patrick Chabal writes: 'The general handicap under which we, Western Africanists, labour is our heritage... To us in the West, Africa is that part of the world that remains most deeply endowed with the two central facets of the "other": the mysterious and the exotic'.[8] The element of mystery surrounding Africa, particularly the rural areas, will prevail until these historical 'blind spots' are fully explored and opened up to the world in an honest and non-biased fashion. In order to better acquaint the world with the real Africa, direct dialogue with African people is required. As it stands, African people have very little control over the image of Africa portrayed to the rest of the world. Angene Wilson illustrated this when she noted, 'CNN is on Ghana

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Transformations of African Marriage (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 333

[6] J. K. Adjaye, 'Perspectives on Fifty Years of Ghanaian Historiography' (2008) 35 History in Africa, 7-8

[7] A. E. Afigbo, quoted in ibid. 8

[8] P. Chabal in J. E. Soothill, Gender, Social Change and Spiritual Power: Charismatic Christianity in Ghana (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 22

television three hours a day. Ghana is integrated into a world system of communication, but has no input into that system'.[9]

In March 1957, in 'a blow to colonialism', Ghana became the first sub-Saharan African nation to achieve independence.[10] This led to a new revolutionary generation of African historians determined to rewrite Africa's past. Paradoxically, however, they automatically adopted western methods of historical investigation. They ambitiously sought to produce an overreaching narrative of African history and chose sizeable areas and groups for study; the over-concentration on the southern Ashanti region and the Akan people of Ghana, for instance, has been widely noted.[11] This nationalistic history abandoned non-centralised societies and small tribes, and failed to encompass the experiences of marginalised people, such as the women (and men) of Northern Ghana.[12] The issue remains: Ibrahim Mahama writes, 'Literature on ethnic groups in Northern Ghana is appallingly scarce. And when one is lucky to find a book on any of the tribes, it is invariably found either to be out of date or limited in scope or too superficial'.[13]

With post-national historical approaches, smaller local studies began to emerge, as did gender studies: Christine Oppong's Female and Male in West Africa (1983) was the groundbreaking work in this field. Despite the rapid growth in literature on African women since the mid-1980s, 'women remain largely invisible or misrepresented in mainstream, or rather "malestream", African history'.[14] Furthermore,

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[9] A. H. Wilson 'Oburoni outside the Whale: Reflections on an Experience in Ghana' (1998) 26 Theory and Research in Social Education, 418

[10] D.E. Apter, 'Ghana's Independence: Triumph and Paradox' (2008) 98 Transition, 11

[11] Adjaye, 'Perspectives', 10, 19-20

[12] ibid. 10, 14-15; C. K. Adenaike and J. Vansina, In Pursuit of History: Fieldwork in Africa (Oxford: James Currey,1996), xi

[13] I. Mahama, History and Traditions of the Dagbon (Tamale: Gillbt 2004), i

[14] Zeleza, P. T. 'Gender Biases in African Historiography' in Oyèrónké Oyěwùmi (ed.) African Gender Studies: A Reader (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 207

African gender studies have been set back by the insistence of many African males that 'our women are not oppressed'.[15] These men reject feminism and sexism as concepts relevant to Africa. The issues of classism, racism and poverty are considered more important factors in the oppression of women (that is, when it is admitted that oppression is even a problem). This stance is essentially male propaganda, designed to prevent African women from raising themselves out of their predicament.[16]

The myths, proverbs and folktales of Africa have a similar effect. Much of Africa's history has been passed on through generations orally. As a frequently used form of dialogue, proverbs and folktales have become authoritative sources for describing how life is and prescribing what it ought to be.[17] Stories warn against personal ambition and 'crude' use of power; meanwhile, they emphasise the 'correct' use of women's power, that is, to be hard-working wives, to create life and to look after children.[18] Oduyoye writes:

Folktales are woven with threats that specify gender roles to appropriately prepare men and women for their roles in society. When a girl... shows signs of non-conformity, the telling of a story ensures that she does not become an example to be emulated.[19]

Proverbs are tools of gender socialisation and put women in a subordinate, even subservient, position to men. For instance, 'When a woman makes the giant drum, it is kept in a man's room' and 'Like hens, women wait for cocks to crow announcing the arrival of daylight'. Women are frequently compared to hens and chickens in reference to their mothering role, though it is made clear that the father - 'the cock' - rules the roost. Additionally, Tim Woods highlights the 'persistent debilitating effects of constructing images of

[15] Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa, 13
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid. 20-21
[18] Ibid. 27-28, 43, 49
[19] Ibid. 52

the African mother as Mother Africa' - another common occurrence, particularly in folktales.[20] The reverence of women as wives and mothers downplays their agency in other areas. In the same way that exclusionary generalisations have been made by historians, proverbs and folktales 'create and reinforce the image of an undifferentiated mass of humanity called "woman",' resulting in 'a composite picture that militates against an individual woman's personhood'.[21] By encouraging conformity and warning against too much ambition, they preserve patriarchal oppression. Meanwhile, in literature, the myth of the naive rural woman is used 'to buoy up [the African male's] conservatism and his yearning for that pre-colonial and patriarchal past where he was definitely king as father, husband and ruler'.[22]

SCHOLARLY PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN WOMEN

Africa's recent and blemished historiography, complicated by the deep-rooted myths of the continent, has resulted in a sense of scholarly confusion about the status of women in rural Africa. There is a common perception that rural African women are permanently oppressed by patriarchy, first falling under the rule of their fathers and then their husbands.[23] This school of thought draws upon the repressive effects of colonialism, which was both racist and sexist in its ideologies and practices. Though male domination was a feature of precolonial societies, women's position relative to men deteriorated under the foreign structures of domination introduced by colonialism.[24] Their predicament is succinctly summed up in the words of Tambudzai, a character in the African novel Nervous Conditions, set in postcolonial Rhodesia: 'Easy! As if it is ever easy.

[20] T. Woods, African Pasts: Memory and History in African Literatures (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 100
[21] Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa, 60-61
[22] O. Ogundipe-Leslie in Woods, African Pasts, 104
[23] N. Sudarkasa, 'The "Status of Women" in Indigenous African Societies' in Andrea Cornwall (ed.) Readings in Gender in Africa (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2005), 25
[24] Florence Stratton in Woods, African Pasts, 103-4

And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other'.[25] Other features of African life are also deemed responsible for the subjugation of women: Elsbeth Robson claims that 'language, culture and the church very much legitimate, validate, and reinforce sexism to the detriment of African women'.[26] Here, Robson implicitly refers to the damaging effects of proverbs and folktales, acknowledging that they not only influence perceptions, but impinge on reality. Oduyoye comments that binding a woman's sense of being to marriage and child-bearing has been a traditional means of marginalising women from power.[27] Akosua Ampofo convincingly argues that gender socialisation within families, beginning from childhood, limits women's access to autonomy, mobility, opportunity and power later in life. Then, 'during adolescence the world expands for boys but contracts for girls. Boys enjoy new privileges reserved for men, and girls endure new restrictions reserved for women'.[28]

A second, oppositional, view claims that rural African women are not victims of patriarchal oppression and stresses their independence and control over their own lives and resources. The loudest voices in this line of argument are those men mentioned earlier who seek to render feminism a non-issue for Africa.[29] However, the concept of male domination has also been challenged by scholars without an agenda. Christine Obbo has argued that the myth of male control goes hand in hand with the myth of female submission in Africa.[30] Sjaak Van Der Geest agrees: 'Outward male dominance appears perhaps to be a cloak to cover the lack of real male power, and female deference is often nothing more than a sop thrown to the men to satisfy their

[25] Ibid. 113
[26] E. Robson, 'Review [untitled]' (1998) 28 Journal of Religion in Africa, 251-252
[27] Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa, 153
[28] A. Ampofo, '"When Men Speak Women Listen": Gender Socialisation and Young Adolescents' Attitudes to Sexual and Reproductive Issues' (2001) 5 African Journal of Reproductive Health, 198
[29] Oduyoye, Daughters of Anowa, 13
[30] Ibid. 101-102

pride while the women carry on the handling of their own affairs.'.[31] Susan Carol Rogers, who has studied the myth of male dominance in detail, writes, 'The assumption of universal male dominance... is belied by evidence that women wield considerable power within the context of the peasant household and community'.[32] Men's monopoly over positions of authority and prestige contribute to the illusion of male control; meanwhile women's power, though present, does not usually involve official authority or legitimisation. Women are often primarily associated with the domestic; even if that is the case, the domestic sphere is central to rural societies and has important implications for life beyond the home.[33] However it is incorrect to assume that the female social world is exclusively associated with the domestic, especially in rural areas where women are so visible and active in the church, the town, the market, and the farm. Furthermore, Niara Sudarkasa has labelled it 'inappropriate' that women and men in Africa are 'everywhere related to each other in a hierarchical fashion'.[34] Oppong, while noting the segregation of the sexes, simultaneously draws attention to the 'sense of connection and complementarity of the roles of women and men' apparent in several spheres of traditional West African life.[35]

In recent years, a third idea has emerged that African women embody a dichotomy of power and submission. Sarah LeVine explains:

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[31] S. van der Geest, 'Role Relationships Between Husband and Wife in Rural Ghana' (1976) 38 Journal of Marriage and Family, 557

[32] S. C. Rogers, 'Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance: a model of female/male interaction in peasant society' (1975) 2 American Ethnologist, 727; It is important to note that African rural settlements are not, strictly, peasant societies, but links can (and have been) drawn between the two - see, for example, J. M. Cohen, 'Peasants and Feudalism in Africa: The Case of Ethiopia' (1974) 8 Canadian Journal of African Studies, 155-157

[33] Rogers, 'The myth of male dominance', 730

[34] Sudarkasa, 'Status of Women', 25

[35] C. Oppong, (ed.) Female and Male in West Africa (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 72

African women... bear a subsistence burden unique among women of the world. As the wives of polygynists on this most polygynous of continents, they share marital rights to a degree that is rare in other places. Yet their relative freedom of movement and independence of activity and spirit have long attracted the interests of outside observers.[36]

LeVine raises an interesting point. Rurality demands resilience: as mentioned, women are outside the home as well as in it, and necessity often forces women to take on the the powerful roles of protector and provider. Despite this apparent equality with men, Sub-Saharan Africa is the only major region where polygyny, a plural marriage arrangement whereby the man has more than one wife, is still widely practiced. Due to Westernisation, it is generally no longer accepted in urban areas (though it is still visible in Muslim communities, and unofficial polygynous practices such as 'outside wives' - basically extramarital affairs - have replaced outright polygyny), but remains a prominent feature of rural life. Scholars have highlighted the inherent asymmetry of the polygynous arrangement: Miriam Zeitzen, in her extensive cross-cultural study of polygamy, writes, 'Issues of gender and power run like undercurrents through the whole discussion on polygyny, because to most women it implies unequal relations between men and women, as reflected in men's ability to take several wives versus women's one husband'.[37] However African feminists have criticised western feminists for their overemphasis on gender oppression in their discussions of the institution. Indeed, the debate about the pros and cons of polygyny is often undermined by the argument that it is tied to a western/non-western agenda. It is said that western commentators, in their outspoken disapproval of the custom, have failed to properly understand the conditions and concerns of African women.[38]

[36] S. LeVine (with R. A. Levine), Mothers and Wives: Gusii Women of East Africa (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 1
[37] M. K. Zeitzen, Polygamy: A Cross-Cultural Analysis (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 125
[38] Ibid.

Sangeetha Madhavan emphasises the potentially collaborative nature of polygynous unions, arguing that co-wives often develop co-operative strategies and can gain freedom, mobility and autonomy from sharing productive, reproductive and domestic responsibilities.[39] Their unity empowers them against male hegemony. Others have indicated the potential economic advantages of polygynous marriages, especially in terms of human resources, since more wives produce more children and thus provide a broader productive base. However this argument is becoming less significant in areas where education has been introduced and become the main priority. Laurie DeRose observes, 'Children and wives used to impart wealth, but now men must be wealthy to have many of them'.[40] Polygyny is a hotly contested issue, but negative perceptions inevitably come to the fore in the western mind, and its continued existence contributes to the view of rural African women as subservient and 'backwards'. However we must avoid slipping into the Eurocentric mindset; women's experiences with polygyny vary widely within sociocultural and personal contexts, and extensive and in-depth examination of individuals is necessary before coming to a conclusion on the practice and its impact on women's agency.[41] Only by including the voices of African women in the debate can we hope to develop an understanding of the rural reality. LeVine calls for a move beyond the abstractions of ethnographic description to actual individuals and how they think and feel about their lives, in order to 'help eliminate the misrepresentations of Africans that still abound in Western thought'.[42]

UNCOVERING THE TRUTH

African women's literature has been instrumental in banishing stereotypes and illuminating reality, albeit through fictional characters.

[39] S. Madhavan, 'Best of Friends and Worst of Enemies: Competition and Collaboration in Polygyny' (2002) 41 Ethnology, 69
[40] L. F. DeRose, 'Marriage Type and Relative Spousal Power in Ghana: Changing Effects of Monogamy During Early Fertility Decline' (2007) 38 Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 136
[41] Zeitzen, Polygamy, 130
[42] LeVine, Mothers and Wives, 2

Female authors on the continent have used methods of 'memory work' to encourage a shift in the position of the African woman from the passive object of patriarchal ideology to the assertive subject of her own narrative. As the female protagonist in Zimbabwean novel Nehandra, says, 'Hope for the nation is born out of the intensity of newly created memory'.[43] While the social behaviour of African women is well-documented, their patterns of personal experience and private feelings have rarely been explored,[44] except through literature:

Scholarly studies of society can be compared to aerial photographs: they may locate a church within a general layout of a town, but they cannot show us what the church is really like. A work of literature, on the other hand, presents something like a personal portrait, etched sharply... the life studies which they provide open up wider insights than are possible when a whole society is herded together.[45]

Oral histories can do the same, only more effectively, since the voices they produce are real and direct. In recent years, the western obsession with documentary evidence has been renounced and the validity of oral history acknowledged. According to Luis White, Stephan Miescher and David Cohen, three prominent historians of Africa, 'No element has served as a clearer signature of and for African historiography than the development of a central position for the oral source and oral history within the programmes of recovering the African past'.[46] Indeed, Alessandro Portelli stresses the importance of oral sources in giving us information about those whose written history is either missing or distorted.[47] Paul Thompson says that oral history 'can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place'.[48] It seems only natural that oral history has a significant role in the discovery of

[43] Woods, African Pasts, 105; 116-117
[44] LeVine, Mothers and Wives, 2
[45] Okpewho, 'Understanding African Marriage', 337
[46] Author's italics. White et al, African Words, 2
[47] Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', 34
[48] P. Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past' in Perks and Thompson, The Oral History Reader, 22

African past: not only does Africa have an inherently vibrant oral tradition, but illiteracy, especially in rural areas, has meant that written historical documents are sparse. Hampate Ba argues that the written word has not yet adequately encroached on the spoken word as the chief means of communicating knowledge in most African countries.[49] Oral history is even more significant where women are concerned, given that 70 percent of the illiterate population of the world is female.[50] Through interview, the historian can facilitate respondents in speaking for themselves, giving them greater control over the view of rural African women that is projected to the world and an opportunity to contest - or confirm - perceptions held by both westerners and African males.

Oral history is not a flawless dialogue. It is impossible to exhaust the entire memory of a single informant, therefore oral sources are inherently incomplete. The data extracted from interviews may differ depending on factors such as time, place, and interaction between interviewer and respondent.[51] Furthermore Thompson highlights the downsides of a relationship 'in which a middle-class professional determines who is to be interviewed and what is to be discussed and then disappears with a tape of somebody's life which they never hear about again - and if they did, might be indignant at the unintended meanings imposed on their words'.[52] This problem is intensified when the researcher is in foreign territory. Daphne Patai points to the inherent inequalities that exist between 'First World' researchers and 'Third World' respondents.[53] Indeed one of the most prominent challenges when interviewing rural African respondents is an ethical one, encapsulated by the concerns of Patai:

[49] As referenced in K. M. Phiri, 'Orature and the written word in African history' (Public lecture delivered to the Humanities Advanced Technology & Information Institute, University of Glasgow, 24-11-2010)
[50] Geiger, 'Women's Life Histories', 335
[51] Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', 39
[52] Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past', 30
[53] D. Patai, 'US Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?' in S. B. Gluck and Patai (eds.) Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History (London: Routledge, 1991), 137-154

I was troubled by the sheer poverty of some of the people whom I interviewed, by my limited ability to give practical assistance, and by the problems attendant even upon offering of such assistance which clearly signals patronage and reintroduces a hierarchy that was at times absent in the intense intimacy of the interview situation.[54]

Even if a level of equality can be established, it is rendered insignificant when the researcher goes home at the end of the project, reflecting her privileged ability to leave.[55] Calvin Pryluck comments on this matter, 'Ultimately, we are all outsiders in the lives of others. We can take our gear and go home; they have to continue their lives where they are'.[56] However, Marjory Wolf says that if it wasn't for these differences, we would not be there doing research in the first place. Furthermore, an outsider's position can be favourable, since 'the foreigner... casts a fresh eye on a scene that to the native-born is so familiar that it is invisible'.[57] There are two possible reassurances which may ease the concerns of the interviewer: first, women are hopefully validated and empowered by the interview process; second, their stories can at the very least highlight existing problems and raise consciousness, and at the most create potential for positive change. The Popular Memory Group believe that oral history is 'a necessary aspect of the struggle for a better world'.[58]

David Dunaway questions how much a few isolated historical examples can account for the whole culture[59] - but the Personal Narratives Group contend that generalisation without attention to the

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[54] Patai, 'Ethical Problems of Personal Narratives, or, Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?' (1987) 8 International Journal of Oral History, 8-9
[55] D. Wolf, 'Situating Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork' in D. L. Wolf (ed.) Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork (Oxford: Westview Press, 1996), 35
[56] C. Pryluck in Patai, 'Who Should Eat the Last Piece of Cake?', 9
[57] M. Wolf, 'Afterword: Musings from an Old Gray Wolf' in Wolf, Feminist Dilemmas, 219
[58] Popular Memory Group, 'Popular Memory: Theory, politics, method' in Perks and Thompson, *The Oral History Reader*, 47
[59] D. K. Dunaway, 'Transcription: Shadow or Reality?' (1984) 12 Oral History Review, 113-114

truths of experience is fruitless.[60] Subjectivity can be a good thing: oral history rejects the privileging of one story over another and accepts the multiplicity of voices. Interviews provide valuable personal perspectives, and subtle and complex historical insights may be gained from the intertwining of individual lives. Since we cannot transcribe an entire culture, we must interview in order to piece it together and illuminate it.[61] By looking at the links between women's experiences and the truths that they reveal, historians can avoid 'deceptive generalisations' and develop 'knowledge that admits the fact and value of difference into its definition'.[62]

While the status of women in rural Africa will remain a matter for scholarly debate, since degrees of power and agency will inevitably vary widely depending on personal factors, that debate will be better informed by the inclusion of female African voices. As Portelli points out, 'Historical work using oral sources is unfinished because of the nature of the sources; historical work excluding oral sources is incomplete by definition'.[63] Only once we are familiar with the 'smaller picture' through oral history can we hope to fill in the omissions of Africa's history and achieve a 'true' account which is inclusive of the experiences of rural African women. Oral history can break down barriers: while rurality, Africanness and femaleness may be obstacles to fair representation in traditional historical research and writing, they thrive in the oral history setting. Africa's strong oral tradition, coupled with the ultimate aim of the oral historian to give marginalised groups a voice, makes the interview the ideal means for gathering information about rural African women. It is the only form of dialogue with the potential to bridge the gap between perceptions of rural African women and the often wildly different reality.

[60] Personal Narratives Group, Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1989) 262
[61] Dunaway, 'Transcription', 113-114
[62] Personal Narratives Group, Interpreting Women's Lives, 262-264
[63] Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different', 40

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