

Oral Genealogy in Africa: Preserving Critical Knowledge

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Abstract:

Many tribes in Africa have a tradition of sharing their ancestral information orally. Written records may not exist so oral histories may be the only records available for genealogical research. The younger generation is less interested in becoming tribal historians. Tribes risk losing their history as the older generations die. FamilySearch helps indigenous people preserve their oral history for future generations. We primarily interview family elders “storytellers”. FamilySearch transcribes the genealogical information and publishes it online for others to use.

The presentation will explain the challenges and results of capturing oral genealogies. FamilySearch started a project in 2004 to record oral histories with genealogical content.

Keywords: Oral history, genealogy, intangible cultural heritage, oral interview programs

About FamilySearch

FamilySearch, historically known as the Genealogical Society of Utah, which was founded in 1894, is dedicated to preserving the records of the family of mankind. Our purpose is simple—to help people connect with their ancestors through easy access to historical records.

FamilySearch gladly joins and partners with others who share this vision. We pioneered industry standards for gathering, imaging, indexing, and preserving records. Advances in technology and the emergence of our digital world now provide an opportunity for us to share these resources with the world.

We strive to create and link the best and most valuable research resources to help people discover who they are by exploring where they come from. For over 100 years, FamilySearch and its predecessors have been actively gathering, preserving, and sharing genealogical records worldwide.¹

Oral Genealogies Project in Africa

Oral genealogies are part of the world's intangible cultural heritage.² Many countries lack written records and only have an oral tradition. FamilySearch started recording oral genealogies in the 1960s in the islands of Polynesia. We recognized then how critical it was to preserve the history before the person passed away. In 2004 in Ghana, FamilySearch began a small effort to understand how to record oral family histories.

By 2016, it became clear that unless we dramatically accelerate this effort, large amounts of African oral history and records would be lost forever. Today FamilySearch funds more than 5,000 African contract interviewers in 15 countries: Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, DR Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, south Africa, Togo, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. By 2024, FamilySearch will conduct over 500,000 interviews and preserve over 190 million records.

Throughout Africa, from Accra to Zimbabwe, where irreplaceable family information and traditions are at risk of being lost due to neglect, natural disasters, war, and deterioration, FamilySearch volunteers are also helping preserve this valuable history so Africans can connect with their roots. Researchers can search the millions of African-related records as they are published online at [FamilySearch.org](https://www.familysearch.org).

The African culture presents a unique set of challenges to family history research. Because most family information is passed down orally, FamilySearch is focused on preserving both African oral traditions and related records that can help people learn about their ancestors.

There is a proverb that states, "In Africa, when an old man dies, it is a library that burns," says Malian diplomat Amadou Hampaté Bâ.³ "Unfortunately, due to economic difficulties, many young people are moving from their villages, where they have the chance of obtaining information from the older people. The purpose of the oral genealogy project is to go to these old people and record what they know before they die."⁴

Most African families have a designated "storyteller" who is responsible to memorize the tribe's oral traditions, including names of ancestors going back six to thirty generations. FamilySearch works with village chiefs and local people to visit these storytellers and record the information they have been charged to remember throughout their lives. The interview collects an audio recording and photographs. During the interview, the family names and information are written down on paper. Once it is recorded, the lineage-linked data is

¹ <https://www.familysearch.org/home/about>

² <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>

³ Malian diplomat Amadou Hampaté Bâ before UNESCO, December 1, 1960

⁴ <https://media.familysearch.org/familysearch-helping-preserve-and--provide-access-to-african-records-and-family-histories/> (Published in 2011.)

uploaded into a computer format developed by FamilySearch called GEDCOM. Currently, this GEDCOM file is put into FamilySearch’s Community Trees project, but it will eventually be integrated with the FamilySearch.org website.

The interview process includes introductions, discussion, and negotiation with heads of tribes, villages, and clans. While on-site, FamilySearch gets written agreement with the storyteller, records an audio file, takes photographs, and captures the genealogy details. Later the genealogical information is input in a lineage-linked records system on a computer.

Before 2016, FamilySearch completed 14,900 interviews containing approximately 5.2 million names. In 2018, we had over 5,000 people conducting interviews. Over 150 contract organizations in Africa supported this program. See Table 1 for the number of interviews by year and the yearly record count.

Type of Count	2016	2017	2018	2019 (projected)
Interview Count	2,207	7,813	50,702	70,000
Record count	638,362	2,709,676	16,200,000	24,000,000

Table 1: Summary of Completed Oral Genealogy Interviews

Goals for 2019-2024

FamilySearch aspires to collect over 500,000 interviews in at least 15 countries which could include approximately 190 million names. In 2018, there was great growth in the program collecting over 16 million names. We have a quality focus for the year 2019. Quality is a part of all communication, training, and the process itself. Several quality reviews are built into collecting interviews and preserving the oral histories.

Preserving these precious records for the people of Africa is critical. Major reasons for this urgency are: (1) the age of people with knowledge, (2) massive migration to mega-cities across Africa, (3) technology has become a distractor for young people, and (4) the population explosion.

This project aligns well with the United Nations program for people of African descent. “The International Decade for People of African Descent”, to be observed from 2015 to 2024, provides a solid framework for the United Nations, Member States, civil society and all other relevant actors to join together with people of African descent and take effective measures for the implementation of the programme of activities in the spirit of recognition, justice and development.⁵

The genealogical breadth and depth of each interview varies between individuals and countries. For 2018, each interview provided an average of 320 names across 5.2 generations. See Table 2 for the number of names collected by country last year. However, the correlation between the number of generations and the number of names is weak. Oral genealogies that cover more generations do not necessarily contain more names, nor do genealogies with more names necessarily cover more generations. Informants may narrate their genealogy with a more lateral focus, delving into the names of many extended relatives as they explain their genealogy from the first ancestor down to the present.

⁵ <http://www.un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade/index.shtml>

FamilySearch publishes the audio files, photographs, and the genealogies at <https://www.familysearch.org/search/family-trees/>. Metadata from the interview is stored in a bibliographic record in our online catalogue. FamilySearch will preserve these files along with other digital assets that we preserve around the world.

Although the majority of African heritage is oral, written records such as censuses and birth, marriage, and death certificates can help people verify the names, dates, and places in their family history. FamilySearch has worked with governments, archives, and churches in Ghana, South Africa, Côte D’Ivoire, Liberia, Swaziland, Nigeria, Lesotho, Namibia, Sierra Leone, Benin, DR Congo, Zambia, and Zimbabwe to digitize records of genealogical importance. FamilySearch employee Stephen Nickle says some of the irreplaceable records in these countries are in danger of being lost.

Country	Names Submitted
Ghana	6,412,583
Nigeria	4,006,750
Kenya	3,654,215
Uganda	978,771
DR Congo	524,210
Liberia	309,955
Sierra Leone	105,074
Zimbabwe	101,282
Benin	76,782
Congo	46,600
Togo	6,042
Total	16,219,564

Table 2: Names Collection in 2018 by Country

“There are various records throughout Africa that are at risk. Some are destroyed through war or deterioration or because there is a lack of room and other records are more important,” Nickle said.⁶ “When those records are destroyed, a part of Africa goes away. Preserving those records helps future generations know where they came from, which is an important part of maintaining a culture.”

Some benefits of this oral genealogy program include a connected experience for people in Africa, most of whom know their homeland or village. This published set will be the largest collection of families in Africa – with life events and relationships. The oral genealogies are a source for social science research and anthropologic studies. The system has audio files in indigenous languages and may tie into other sources, such as digital and paper records.

The African diaspora during the Transatlantic slave trade removed the identities, culture, and history of many people. It is possible that DNA can help reconnect some people of African descent. Paper records across the world may help in filling some gaps in family histories. The oral genealogies may be an additional source in helping people reconnect. Along with major DNA providers, we are exploring the possibility of partner organizations collecting DNA samples in future interviews.

⁶ <https://media.familysearch.org/familysearch-helping-preserve-and--provide-access-to-african-records-and-family-histories/>

Additional Outreach Efforts

FamilySearch is also working with children in South Africa to encourage them to write down their family traditions. FamilySearch volunteer Isebelle Krauss conducted training to help young people know how to interview the elderly people in their village.⁷

“We encourage them to find their roots, to record it and to be proud of who they are,” Krauss said.

Krauss worked with the South African Department of Education and Heritage and the Department of Arts and Culture to hold oral tradition storytelling competitions in public schools.

“The children are encouraged to collect as many names as possible and come back to either sing, recite, or give a hard copy of their research,” Krauss said. “The pilot project was in Kwa Zulu Natal, and I was privileged to be one of the judges at the final round between 30 schools. What an experience! The little ones danced and sang their history and an eight-year-old won the competition with 15 generations.”

FamilySearch provides user guidance in different ways including a help center, a learning center, and a research wiki. The Learning Center includes hundreds of recorded classes on a variety of topics. The videos were prepared by staff at the Family History Library and from other institutions. Users can stream the video and watch it at their pace. Users can pause the video when necessary or only watch selections of it. In 2008, FamilySearch launched a wiki to provide guidance about how to do genealogical research.⁸ Our Research Wiki has many articles about places, resources, and institutions. The research wiki has content written by volunteers that offer free advice about how to find, use, and analyze historical records. This is a growing part of our website. Record custodians can create a page in the Research Wiki where they can describe their services, collections, expertise, and unique resources.

Conclusion

The research of Dr. Brent M. Hansen and Sydney Bjork affirmed and reaffirmed that FamilySearch’s effort to collect and preserve oral genealogy narratives in sub-Saharan Africa is already having a remarkable impact in Africa and has potential for even greater influence in the world. The work is expanding and elevating the lives of those it touches. The depth of records is promising, the diaspora from Africa is craving connection, and social forces are demanding urgency.

The need to preserve oral history as intangible cultural heritage exists all around the world. Libraries large and small can help to record the experiences and knowledge of individuals in their area.

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⁷ Ibid.

⁸ https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/FamilySearch_Wiki:FamilySearch_Research_Wiki

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