The Role of Interdisciplinary Approach in African Historical Reconstruction in Ohafia

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of the interdisciplinary approach in reconstructing African history, using the Ohafia people of southeastern Nigeria as a case study. Historically, Africa was marginalized by early Western historians who dismissed the continent as lacking history due to the absence of written records. Scholars like Hegel and Trevor-Roper propagated Eurocentric narratives that portrayed Africa as a "dark continent." However, contemporary African historiography has challenged these misconceptions by embracing interdisciplinary methodologies. By integrating oral traditions, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, geography, and even genetic studies, historians are now able to reconstruct more accurate and inclusive accounts of African societies. In the case of Ohafia, oral traditions—supported by cultural practices like the war dance, age-grade systems, and place-based narratives—offer rich historical insights into migration patterns, social structure, and identity. Archaeological and linguistic data complement these traditions, helping to verify and contextualize them. The study underscores the significance of interdisciplinary methods in filling the historical gaps left by the absence of written documentation, ultimately contributing to the preservation and validation of African heritage. The Ohafia example

demonstrates how communities once thought to be ahistorical are, in fact, rooted in complex and enduring historical realities.

Key words: Ohafia, History, Interdisciplinary Approach, Documentation, Heritage

Introduction

One of the major strategies established in order to reconstruct African history is the concept of the interdisciplinary approach. Discovering African history and turning African historiography into an academic discipline brought about the organization of seminars, symposia, and international conferences where numerous scholarly bodies sought to lay down rules of methodology and theoretical frameworks for the practice of African historiography. These various interaction centers created an ideal forum for the claims of different disciplines to secure a position in African historiography. This methodological framework—referred to as the interdisciplinary approach—has played a transformative role in African historiographical reconstruction.

Through this approach, African history began to emerge from the shadows of colonial distortion and neglect. The interdisciplinary model enabled scholars from diverse fields—such as archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and sociology—to contribute to the body of African historical knowledge, offering different perspectives and tools for interpretation (Falola & Heaton, 2022). For instance, archaeology provided physical evidence of African civilizations such as Great Zimbabwe and the Nok culture, which had long been dismissed by colonial narratives (Connah, 2001). Linguistics allowed historians to trace migratory patterns and cultural exchanges through language evolution (Ehret, 2000), while anthropology and ethnography helped preserve and interpret African oral traditions that were previously disregarded as unscientific or mythological.

Historically, African history lost its original identity, particularly during the colonial era when European scholars often presented a Eurocentric perspective that denied Africa a credible and autonomous past. The colonial historiographical framework either ignored African voices or imposed foreign interpretations on African realities. Consequently, African history was often treated as an appendage

to European imperial expansion or missionary endeavors, rather than as a discipline with its own intellectual autonomy (Rodney, 2018). However, the rise of post-colonial scholarship, supported by interdisciplinary initiatives, challenged these biases and emphasized African agency and knowledge systems.

With the emergence of the interdisciplinary approach, African history began to regain its status as an independent and legitimate academic field. This was made possible through collaborative research projects, such as the UNESCO General History of Africa series, which brought together experts from various disciplines and regions to reconstruct Africa's past using a combination of methodologies and sources (UNESCO, 1981). These efforts underscored the value of integrating oral traditions, archaeological findings, material culture, and linguistic evidence in crafting holistic historical narratives.

Ohafia is an igbo speaking geographical area in Abia State Nigeria. It's also a local government area which consist of twenty-six villages. The ancestors of the Ohafia people were renowned as mighty warriors. History of Ohafia is traced back to ancient city of benign. They migrated from benin to Andoni, from Andoni to Bende LGA, from bende to present day Ohafia. Ohafia people led by Akpo Ukwu they were said to have migrated around the 14th century AD from Owan, a town in the ancient benin kingdom during the reign of Oba Ewuare. The historiography of Ohafia centers around its rich cultural heritage, particularly it's war dance and the tradition of beheading defeated enemies which were seen as symbols of a warrior's courage.

Interdisciplinary Approach in Historical Reconstruction

The interdisciplinary approach in historical reconstruction refers to a methodological framework that integrates tools, theories, and methods from different academic fields to study, interpret, and reconstruct the past. Historians adopting this approach move beyond the limitations of traditional historical narratives and disciplinary boundaries to draw upon the diverse strengths of fields such as archaeology, anthropology, geography, linguistics, sociology, philosophy, economics, forensic science, and environmental science. The goal is to create a more complete, nuanced, and empirically grounded understanding of historical processes and events (Edeh, 2021).

In its most basic form, this approach allows scholars to cross-examine historical evidence from a variety of perspectives. For instance, archaeologists may uncover physical remnants of past societies, such as tools, housing structures, and burial sites, which offer invaluable insights into the socio-economic life of those societies. When combined with anthropological studies of present-day cultural practices, as well as linguistic reconstructions of indigenous languages, such evidence can offer a multidimensional understanding of ancient civilizations that textual analysis alone may not provide. Historical geographers, through spatial analysis and environmental reconstructions, contribute by showing how geography and climate have influenced human settlement and migration patterns.

Importantly, the interdisciplinary approach enhances the validity and reliability of historical conclusions. Where one source might be speculative or biased, interdisciplinary collaboration allows for cross-verification. For example, oral histories can be corroborated with archaeological data or colonial administrative records. This becomes crucial in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, where written records may be scarce or incomplete, and where oral traditions play a major role in the transmission of knowledge (Davidson, 2020).

Another significant contribution of the interdisciplinary approach is its ability to bridge epistemological gaps between different knowledge systems. In particular, it brings scientific and humanistic methods into dialogue. For example, carbon dating, remote sensing, and DNA analysis have been employed in combination with traditional historical inquiry to confirm migration routes, dates of ancient settlements, and even the ancestry of modern populations. This scientific backing gives weight to long-held indigenous accounts that were previously dismissed as myth or folklore by colonial historians.

African Historical Reconstruction

African historical reconstruction refers to the academic and practical efforts to recover, analyze, and narrate the histories of African societies—often in contexts where conventional historical records are limited, fragmented, or biased. Unlike regions with extensive archival documentation, many African societies relied on oral traditions, artifacts, and ecological landscapes to preserve their past. Therefore, reconstructing African history requires a deliberate and often

innovative integration of diverse sources and methodologies to piece together complex historical narratives (Falola & Heaton, 2022).

One of the most distinguishing features of African historical reconstruction is the centrality of oral traditions. In many African societies, history was passed down through generations via storytelling, songs, proverbs, and rituals. These oral sources were not merely anecdotal but represented structured and culturally embedded systems of historical transmission. However, early colonial scholars often dismissed oral traditions as unreliable or mythical. Contemporary historians, supported by anthropological and ethnographic studies, have increasingly recognized the value of oral history, especially when triangulated with other forms of evidence like archaeological finds or linguistic analysis.

Another critical aspect of African historical reconstruction is archaeology. Africa's rich archaeological heritage—from the Great Zimbabwe ruins to the Nok terracotta sculptures and the ancient city of Timbuktu—provides tangible evidence of sophisticated societies, trade networks, and urbanization long before European colonization. Archaeologists use excavation techniques, carbon dating, material culture analysis, and environmental reconstructions to interpret the technological, economic, and social dynamics of pre-colonial African societies. These findings challenge the outdated colonial narrative that portrayed Africa as lacking history and civilization.

Linguistic evidence is also central to reconstructing African history. Comparative linguistics helps trace the movement of people and the diffusion of cultures by analyzing language families, loan words, and syntax. For instance, the spread of Bantu languages across central and southern Africa has provided insights into ancient migration patterns, agricultural practices, and inter-group relations. Language thus becomes a historical tool, not just a means of communication.

Ethnography and cultural anthropology contribute by providing contextual insights into social structures, belief systems, and kinship patterns. By studying contemporary communities that retain traditional practices, anthropologists can infer historical continuities and changes. This method, known as ethnohistory, is particularly useful when written records are sparse. It helps historians understand

how African societies organized themselves, governed communities, conducted trade, resolved conflicts, and interacted with the natural environment.

There is also the issue of external influence. While foreign scholars have made significant contributions to African historiography, there is a growing call for African historians to lead the process of historical reconstruction. This includes setting research agendas, controlling access to heritage sites, and publishing in platforms that reflect African priorities and audiences. The rise of African-based research institutions and scholarly journals is a positive development in this regard.

Ohafia Oral History: An Interpretation of Migration And Identity

Ohafia is a culturally significant Igbo community in southeastern Nigeria whose history, primarily preserved through oral traditions, remains under scholarly construction. Former *Guardian* and *Vanguard* news editor, Uduma Kalu, offers this summary as a prelude to a broader historical compilation currently in progress. The oral history of Ohafia is richly interwoven with migratory narratives, war songs, and socio-political transformations spanning centuries.

Oral Tradition and Historical Memory

The most vital sources of Ohafia history are its war songs, which reflect migratory origins and cultural identity. However, these chants often suffer from distortion due to recent events, memory loss, and reinterpretation over time (Kalu, n.d.). The oral traditions of Ohafia, like much of Igbo history, are in flux, shaped by dynamic retellings and fragmented documentation.

Origins: Hebrew and Benin Connections

One version of the Ohafia origin story posits a Hebrew ancestry, resonating with the broader narrative among the Igbo of ancient Hebrew links. Preliminary DNA research reveals that while some Igbo possess Hebrew genetic markers, anthropological evidence suggests the Igbo predate the Hebrew civilization (Isichei, 1976). This weakens the absolute nature of the Hebrew origin theory but preserves its cultural significance among the people.

Another variant of origin traces Ohafia to the Benin Empire. Yet, this Benin connection is vague in the war songs and remains more symbolic than genealogical. As Oladuah Equiano (1789/1995) noted in *The Interesting Narrative*, the term "Benin origin" often referred to communities under Benin political influence rather than ethnic Bini descent. The Benin Empire, like many ancient cities, was a multi-ethnic center, where Igbo professionals—warriors, blacksmiths, traders, and diplomats—contributed to its expansion (Crowder, 1978).

Eze Chima and the Igbo Exodus from Benin

One critical figure in this historical tapestry is **Eze Chima**, identified as an Aro priest of the Ibini Ukpabi oracle. Chima reportedly traveled to Benin, gained favor with Oba Esigie (r. 1504–1550), and introduced Igbo socio-cultural systems such as the four-market-day cycle—*Eke*, *Orie*, *Afor*, and *Nkwo* (Crowder, 1978; Ndu, 1962). Tensions arose when the Oba's mother clashed with Igbo elites, resulting in a breakdown of relations. Eze Chima returned to Arochukwu, taking many followers with him.

Another version suggests Chima hailed from Agbor or Nri. His town was razed by Benin forces before he sought refuge in the empire. Some accounts mention that the Oba grew envious of Igbo houses surpassing his in size. When property seizure failed, conflicts erupted. Igbo forces retaliated, destroying parts of Benin before migrating east (Isichei, 1976; Kalu, n.d.).

The Ohafia Migration Narrative

Whether Ohafia people were part of Chima's entourage is uncertain. Nonetheless, their oral accounts affirm migration from Benin and a strong Igbo identity. Their timeline of exodus aligns with Chima's departure, suggesting their involvement in the Benin expansion and subsequent fallout (Crowder, 1978).

Mr. Kalu Dike's research on **Idima Abam** notes that Ohafia's martial reputation developed at Ndoni, following the killing of a leader's child. This led to the adoption of warfare tools such as the cutlass (Dike, n.d.). The legendary "Owan" cited in their tales may actually be "Owa," an Ika town near Agbor, further reinforcing links to the Anioma area.

The dialect of Ohafia supports an Anioma—particularly Ika—origin. This linguistic evidence contradicts the idea that Ohafia were Aro and supports migration from Benin as Igbo professionals and warriors (Isichei, 1976; Kalu, n.d.).

The Journey to Present-Day Ohafia

Historian Elizabeth Isichei (1976) questioned why Ohafia would travel such a vast distance from Benin to their current settlement without a clear purpose. Oral traditions lack clarity on this, suggesting random wandering. Yet, there is growing belief that the community intended to journey toward Arochukwu, Eze Chima's ancestral home, when a woman in labor halted their movement. This aligns Ohafia's journey with a broader Igbo exodus motivated by conflict, not mere settlement-seeking.

Their rallying chant, "**Mben Bu Zo**" (Mben, lift and go), reflects an intentional, collective migration (Kalu, n.d.). They were described as "Owan," smooth-faced people, distinguishing themselves from ichi-marked Igbo groups. The town of Owan, now in Edo's Ishan region, was reportedly an assimilated Igbo settlement, reflecting the fluid ethnic borders of precolonial Nigeria (Obaro, 1975).

Historical Consequences of the Benin Exodus

The Ohafia migration was part of a broader population upheaval triggered by conflicts like the Obatala-Oduduwa war in Ife, which reportedly displaced the earliest Igbo settlers (Nwankwo, 2002). The rise of the Benin Empire, driven by trade and slavery, destabilized Anioma communities. The Ohafia and other migrants intensified the slave wars and altered the demography of Igboland and surrounding regions for centuries.

This migration and resulting settlements laid the foundation for the Ohafia's later involvement in warfare and slave-raiding under the influence of Arochukwu's Ibini Ukpabi oracle—a shift that would define Ohafia identity well into the colonial period (Isichei, 1976).

Ohafia, a Brief Profile

The narrative below is a continuation of the Ohafia oral history, recounting aspects not reflected in the war songs. This version is primarily derived from an account

by the late Udumaeze Onuoha Mba, the Ohafia monarch, and supported by the Onyirimba Age Grade in their 2016 publication, *Elevation 2016: Igba Uche Festival Magazine of Onyirimba Age Grade-Isiugwu Ohafia-Abia State*. As in the war songs, the monarch describes the Ohafia people as a group of adventurers who, despite numerous challenges, successfully established a permanent home in the area now called Ohafia. Although there is no archaeological evidence, this account is founded on dominant oral traditions, especially those preserved in war songs (Onuoha Mba, 2016).

According to *Elevation 2016*, the Ohafia people originated from the old Benin Empire, implying links to other ethnic groups, particularly within the Igbo ethnolinguistic sphere. Their migration took them through several locations including Benin, Ndoni, Ibeku, and Bende (Onyirimba Age Grade, 2016). At Ndoni in present-day Rivers State, the group's leader Akpo Uku died, passing leadership to his son Atita Akpo Uku. From there, they migrated to Isieke Ibeku. However, the narrative omits their experiences in the Ikwerre and Etche regions, though traces of linguistic influence persist in the Ohafia dialect, suggesting interaction during the migration (Onuoha Mba, 2016).

At Isieke Ibeku, the absence of strong leadership led to internal discord. A man named Ukoha led mischievous acts that strained relations with their Ibeku and Leru neighbours. One account highlights a conspiracy by the Ibeku people to attack the Ohafia, foiled by Ukoha's son-in-law who revealed the plot. The heightened tension culminated in a mass exodus, reportedly triggered either by a barking dog or, more credibly, the sudden noise of shattering calabashes (Onyirimba Age Grade, 2016). This led to the popular idiomatic saying:
"Aka metu ngu. Ngu metu oba. Oba me kpogoro. Uso su Mben, su Leru. Leru na uso, Mben n'uso."

The panic, driven by fear of imminent violence, made the Ohafia people flee, though some argue they fled out of perceived cowardice. To mask this, they used idiomatic phrases to confuse outsiders regarding the true cause of the flight (Onuoha Mba, 2016). It's worth noting that "Ohafia" as referred to here includes diverse clans and settlements. Historian Kalu Dike (2015) notes that during their

time at Ibeku, different descendants founded other communities like Ututu, Itumbuzo, and Abam, while others stayed back or settled in places like Lokpanta. After fleeing Ibeku, the group paused at Bende, particularly the Okputong Section, to regroup. Leadership now rested on Ezema Atita and his younger brother Onyerubi Atita, since their father had died earlier. When Onyerubi's wife, Orie, went into labour, he halted the journey and established a settlement now called Amaelu Abam (Onyirimba Age Grade, 2016). Ezema Atita and the remaining group moved forward and eventually arrived at Ugwumgbo, today part of Elu Ohafia, where they settled permanently. Upon Ezema's death, his son Uduma Ezema solidified the settlement, making him historically credited as the *founder* of the Ohafia community (Onuoha Mba, 2016).

Ohafia War Dance

A vital component of Ohafia culture is the legendary war dance, a ritual commemoration of the military exploits of their ancestors. Historically, Ohafia warriors earned prestige by defending their territories and sometimes serving as mercenaries for other communities (Isichei, 1976). Mastery in warfare was a standard for male respect and leadership.

The Ohafia War Dance (Ikpirikpi Ogu) is an elaborate performance where dancers mimic combat actions, showcasing bravery and martial prowess. It is symbolic of the warrior spirit of the Ohafia and remains a key cultural identifier during festivals, funerals, and state ceremonies (Onyirimba Age Grade, 2016). In addition to age grades which recruited warriors, specialized war guilds existed, including the Ndi Ikpo, Ndi Ite Igbo, Ndi Ite Odo, and native healers. Collectively, these groups were responsible for defense and the projection of military might in Ohafia. All functioned under the umbrella identity of Ndi Ikpo, working cohesively in wartime and cultural activities (Onuoha Mba, 2016).

Interdisciplinary Approach in African Historical Reconstruction (Ohafia)

The interdisciplinary approach refers to the integration of knowledge and methodologies from multiple academic disciplines to address complex issues or reconstruct knowledge more holistically. In historiography, the interdisciplinary approach involves drawing from various fields such as archaeology, anthropology, oral traditions, linguistics, sociology, geography, and even genetics

to investigate and reconstruct the past. This method is particularly valuable in the context of African history, including the specific history of communities like Ohafia in southeastern Nigeria, where conventional written records are often scarce or completely absent.

In early Western scholarship, Africa was wrongly depicted as a continent without history. Eurocentric historians such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Herbert Spencer, and Hugh Trevor-Roper openly denied the existence of meaningful African history before the advent of Europeans. Hegel, for instance, claimed that Africa was "no historical part of the world" and that it was enveloped in "the dark mantle of night" (Hegel, 1837/2001). Similarly, Trevor-Roper once remarked that African history was "the unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe" (Trevor-Roper, 1965). These views echoed a broader colonial ideology that sought to justify European imperialism by erasing or minimizing the historical agency of African peoples.

One of the significant historiographical problems that plagued African historical reconstruction—particularly in regions like Ohafia—was the scarcity of written records. Many African societies operated on oral traditions and did not develop writing systems that were preserved in the same way as in ancient Europe or Asia. Scholars like A. P. Newton argued that the lack of written sources in Africa invalidated its historical relevance (Newton, 1923). Consequently, African history was either ignored or misrepresented by early scholars who equated written documentation with historical legitimacy.

However, the rise of Africanist scholars and the adoption of the interdisciplinary approach significantly shifted this perspective. Pioneers like Cheikh Anta Diop, Basil Davidson, and Jan Vansina emphasized the importance of oral traditions, archaeology, and other disciplines in validating African history. Vansina (1965), in particular, argued that oral traditions, when critically analyzed, are legitimate historical sources. This view opened the door for a more inclusive methodology in reconstructing African pasts—one that recognized the value of African epistemologies.

In the case of Ohafia, a community in present-day Abia State, Nigeria, the use of the interdisciplinary approach has been instrumental in recovering and reconstructing their complex historical narratives. Ohafia is historically renowned for its warrior culture, age-grade system, and unique traditions like the Ikpirikpi Ogu (war dance). These cultural elements, while rich and vibrant, were not recorded in writing until recent decades. Nevertheless, through oral histories, archaeological investigations, ethnographic accounts, and linguistic analysis, a more complete and nuanced understanding of Ohafia history is now possible.

Oral tradition is perhaps the most important source of historical information in Ohafia. Stories passed down through generations—often in the form of war songs, proverbs, idioms, and clan histories—have preserved essential knowledge about migration routes, ancestral lineage, settlement patterns, and social organization. For example, oral accounts reveal that the Ohafia people may have migrated from the Benin Empire, passing through areas such as Ndoni, Ibeku, and Bende, before finally settling in their present homeland (Onyirimba Age Grade, 2016). The reliability of these stories increases when cross-validated with similar narratives from neighboring communities and linguistic evidence showing cultural intermingling.

Anthropology, another useful discipline, has helped scholars understand the social structure of the Ohafia people, such as the importance of age grades, the roles of secret societies like the Ndi Ikpo, and the significance of gender roles and rituals. These social structures are not only cultural but also historical in the sense that they offer insights into the values and political organizations of the community in precolonial times (Isichei, 1976).

Archaeology has played a growing role in uncovering material remains—such as pottery, tools, iron implements, and burial sites—that affirm the existence of complex and organized societies in Igbo land and the Ohafia region. Although archaeological work in Ohafia is still emerging, findings in surrounding regions like Nsukka, Igbo-Ukwu, and Nri have reinforced the argument that southeastern Nigeria had long-established trade, metallurgy, and religious systems prior to European contact (Shaw, 1970). These discoveries challenge the narrative that African societies were primitive or lacked historical depth.

Linguistics also contributes by analyzing the language and dialects of Ohafia people in comparison to other Igbo-speaking communities. Certain words and expressions—such as those in the tongue-twister "Aka metu ngu. Ngu metu oba. Oba me kpogoro..."—offer clues about migration experiences and cultural anxieties (Onuoha Mba, 2016). Furthermore, similarities in language structure between Ohafia and nearby communities suggest historical interactions and shared ancestry.

Geography plays a subtle but significant role as well. The terrain, rivers, and forested areas of southeastern Nigeria influenced settlement patterns, warfare strategies, and trade networks. The choice of Ohafia's final settlement site was likely informed by geographic considerations such as defensibility, availability of water sources, and agricultural fertility. Understanding these environmental factors helps historians frame the physical realities that shaped human decisions in the past. Another modern contribution to interdisciplinary historical reconstruction is genetic anthropology, which uses DNA to trace lineage and migration. Although not yet widely applied in Ohafia studies, such methods have the potential to affirm or challenge oral histories regarding origin and movement, especially in connection with other Igbo subgroups or the broader Niger-Congo family. By applying the interdisciplinary approach, the reconstruction of Ohafia history has become more comprehensive and credible.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the interdisciplinary approach serves as a powerful tool for reconstructing African history, particularly in areas like Ohafia where conventional written sources are scarce. Early Eurocentric scholars failed to recognize Africa's rich historical heritage due to their limited reliance on written documents. However, the integration of oral traditions, archaeology, anthropology, linguistics, and geography has revealed the depth and complexity of African civilizations. The Ohafia community's history, long preserved through songs, idioms, and clan stories, becomes more credible and vivid when complemented by other academic disciplines. Their journey from regions like Benin through Ndoni, Ibeku, and Bende to their present location, as well as their cultural institutions like the war dance and age grades, all attest to a dynamic and historically significant society. This reconstruction process not only affirms the

identity and legacy of Ohafia but also restores dignity to African historiography as a whole. Ultimately, the interdisciplinary approach has proven indispensable in unearthing Africa's true historical narrative, challenging colonial distortions, and offering a fuller picture of the continent's past for both academic scholarship and future generations.

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