

**TOPIC : CONCEPTUALISATION OF HISTORY**

**SUBTOPIC : SOURCES OF HISTORY**

## **OBJECTIVES**

**BY THE END OF THE TOPIC, LEARNERS SHOULD BE ABLE TO:**

- ✓ Identify different methods of discovering history.
- ✓ Outline the difference between primary and secondary sources of history.
- ✓ Describe the merits and demerits of sources of history.

### **Introduction**



Historical sources

- Historians write history using evidence from different sources.
- They put together the evidence from different sources to write the history of a particular period or society.

- The evidence can be used to reconstruct the history of a group of people.
- Historians explore different forms of evidence in order to understand a group of people better.

## Sources of evidence

- Sources –are all materials which have a direct bearing or can be of any assistance in the construction of the history of a particular period.
- Sources are any leftovers of the past such as documents, buildings or pieces of art.
- Sources provide information in different ways.
- There are two types of historical sources that is;
  1. Primary sources.
  2. Secondary sources.

### 1. Primary source

- Primary sources are non- written or written documents made at the time of the event.
- Primary sources are original records from the past recorded by people who;
  - (a) Were involved in the event.
  - (b) Witnessed the event.
  - (c) Know the persons involved in the event.
- Moreover primary sources are original documents capturing the exact words or accounts of the people.
- Primary sources involve the consultation of historical documents, visuals, journals, letters, artefacts, audio recording, diaries and speeches.
- They provide valuable clues to historians on the livelihood of people under study for example when studying the economic activities of the Great Zimbabwe State.

- These primary sources enable historians to be closer to the historical events of a particular society.
- Primary sources were either created during the time period being studied or later created by a participant in the event.
- They contain new information that has not been evaluated, analysed or even interpreted.
- They also provide direct impressions of the author in that event.

## 2. Secondary sources

- Secondary sources are second hand account or summation of another person's account.
- Secondary sources comments and interprets other works such as the primary sources.
- Secondary sources are basically created by someone who did not experience the first hand information or participate in the historical event.
- Secondary sources include published works such as textbooks, journal, magazines and encyclopaedias.



Secondary vs primary sources

## Historical sources

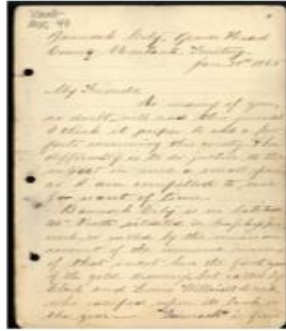
- There are three main sources of evidence when studying history and these are
  - a) Written records.
  - b) Oral traditions/ memoirs
  - c) Archaeology.
- Other sources include pictures, languages, arts as well as music.

### a) Written records

- Written records are pieces of written documents preserving knowledge of facts and events that took place a long time ago.
- This is information that is written down and historians use it to reconstruct the History of a particular group of people.
- Written records are documents written a long time ago and they include both published and unpublished works.
- These documents can be used with other sources to reconstruct the history of a particular society.
- Examples of written records are:
  - Books
  - Newspapers
  - Magazines
  - Letters
  - Diaries
  - Journals
  - Clay tablet
- Any other printed matter is also a written record.



diary



letter



Clay tablet



Scroll

## Written Records of History

### Advantages of written records as a source of history

- Evidence is reliable as it is written down.
- Information does not change because it is written down.
- It is permanent
- Can be safely kept in libraries.
- Information can reach as many people as possible through reading.
- Information cannot be distorted as editing is difficult for example with a published textbook.

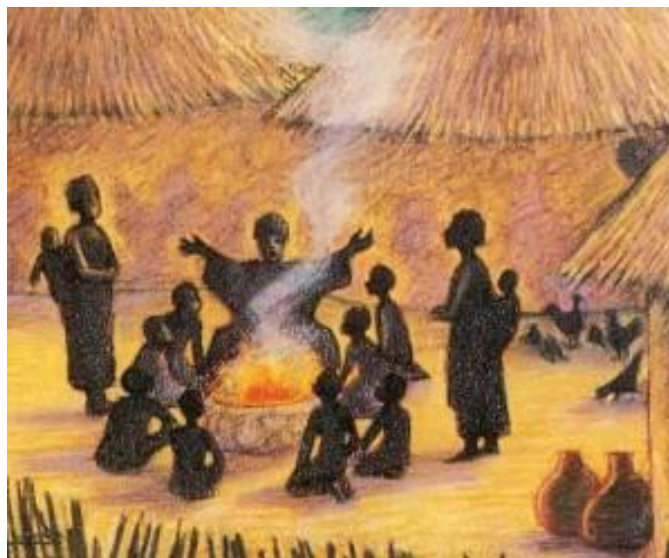
### Disadvantages

- They are unevenly distributed in time and space.
- Information can be destroyed by fire.
- Illiterate people cannot use written records.

- The writer may be influenced by his or her own feelings when writing down the information.
- If information was wrong, it is difficult to correct as a lot of people read it.

#### b) Oral traditions

- Oral tradition refers to the passing on of historical information from one generation to the other by word of mouth.
- It is a story, tradition or practice that is shared orally or through speeches.
- Information can be testimonies transmitted by the word of mouth from one generation to another.
- Information is handed down from one generation by talking and listening to people with historical information.
- During the early years people used to sit around a fire in the evenings listening to tales or even songs and dances being taught by the elders.



Story telling

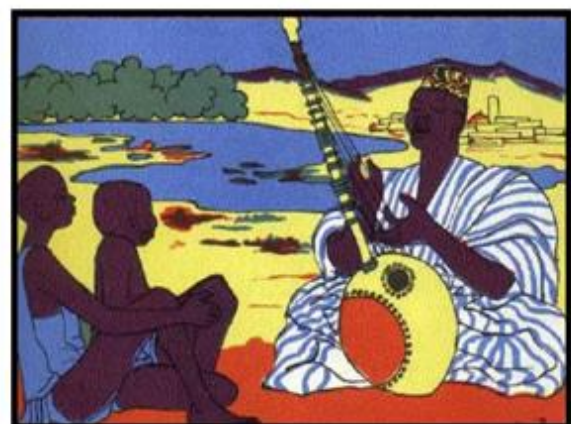
- Story telling allowed elders to teach the younger generation about their beliefs and customs.
- Memoirs are also important forms of oral traditions and these are short accounts of one's history.



- Historians listen to what people remember about their own lives.
- Historians record the information by writing it down or recording using a tape recorder.
- Examples of oral traditions are:
  - Myths
  - Legends
  - Taboos
  - Tales
  - Folklore
  - Proverbs
  - Poems
  - Songs



Dance



songs

### Advantages of oral traditions

- Oral history is easy to gather or collect as information can be given anyway and at any time by someone with historical facts.
- Obtaining history through oral tradition is less expensive, there is no selling and buying of information.
- There is room for questions in oral tradition so as to in depth the information.
- It does not need a person to read and write.

- It is important in stimulating and promoting African Cultural heritage.
- Apart from providing amusement, they educate the youths and promote conformity of cultural norms for example tales.
- Oral tradition facilitates better understanding of history.
- It does not only arouse and express emotion but also pass across knowledge.

#### Disadvantages of oral traditions

- There can be distortions.
- They need support from other sources of history such as archaeology and written records in order to be useful.
- Oral tradition may lack chronology as the interviewee may not remember exact dates or any other information.
- Information may be distorted as the narrator may avoid unpleasant facts for example one may say that we won the war while in actual fact they did not defeat the other state.
- It may be difficult for elders to clearly remember events that happened a long time back thereby omitting some important points of history.

#### c) [Archaeology](#)

- Archaeology is the study of remains from the past.
- It is the study of past human life through fossils and artefacts.
- Fossils are remains of living things such as bones and shells.
- Artefacts are remains of things that were made for example jewellery and plates
- Those who study remains after digging them up from the ground are called archaeologists.
- Archaeologists have to be well trained because they may end up destroying evidence of the past.



- Archaeologists use modern scientific equipment especially for dating things that they find.
- Scientists have used carbon dating to tell how old a fossil is.
- If a bone is dug up by an archaeologist it is taken to a carbon-dating laboratory.
- The amount of radio-carbon in the bone shows how old it is.
- Archaeology may be in the form of:
  - ❖ Bones and shells
  - ❖ Tools
  - ❖ Stone walls
  - ❖ Foundations of buildings



Fossils



Artifacts



Archaeologists working on the floor of an old building

### Advantages of Archaeology

- There is physical evidence that can be seen.
- It can give dates for things up to five million years old.
- It works very well with other sources of history.

- It helps us understand and develop the life of the people under study.
- It provides primary source of information that is not biased by the writings of ancient historians.

#### Disadvantages of Archaeology

- It is expensive.
- It is laborious.
- It cannot give us names, language and traditions of people under study.
- It can only be done by trained personnel so that evidence is not destroyed.