

## **TOPIC THREE: SOURCES OF HISTORICAL DATA**

Sources of historical information or data are very important ingredients in any teaching and learning of History. You cannot learn History without having to get to your sources to ensure that the information that you are giving out is backed by historical facts, dates and other important evidence. These sources are in different forms. The main sources of History are generally divided into two main categories: primary and secondary sources. Each of these sources has its own sub-categories. You need to understand what these sources are, where they can be found and how these sources can be used for different purposes in History research and writing.

### **Categories of History Sources**

There are many sources you can use in history. These sources are in two broad categories:

1. Primary Sources
2. Secondary Sources

Each of these has its own sub-categories, i.e. each can be subdivided into various aspects that together constitute the broad categories called Primary or Secondary sources.

### **Primary Sources**

A Primary source is information or data in its original first hand form; it is original first-hand information. Primary sources are accounts recorded by people with immediate access to the information. Primary sources are used greatly in history or historical research and History writing.

Examples of primary sources important in historical research are: newspapers, documents of state, diaries, letters, and accounts by reliable witnesses.

They enable researchers to 'return' to the past and to get as close as possible to an historical event and/or time period.

### **Examples of Primary Sources**

The following are some (not all) examples of Primary Sources:

- a. Oral sources e.g. oral interviews, oral testimonies, oral traditions

- b. Questionnaires
- c. Diaries
- d. Speeches
- e. Opinion polls
- f. Surveys
- g. Census Data
- h. Letters
- i. Memos (short letter to inform others about new decisions)
- j. E-mail Messages
- k. Short Messaging Service (sms)
- l. Manuscripts
- m. Memoirs (short letters/records written by someone concerning his/her experiences in life, for example Kenneth Kaunda's experiences from school to the present).
- n. Autobiographies (things you write about yourself)
- o. Birth and death records
- p. Texts of court judgments
- q. Statutes, state propositions of laws.
- r. Original artwork
- s. Articles and books that describe an event and are written at the time or during the period when the event occurred. These primary records are written by eye witnesses and journalists.
- t. Articles presenting data and new results of scientific experiments conducted

### **Oral History**

Oral history is history as told or passed on by word of mouth (oral testimony) by witnesses who saw what happened or who experienced an event or activity. Oral

tradition is history that is passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next. This is history that is committed to human memory.

Oral History has a number of advantages when it is utilized by historians in their research and writing of history. Two of these advantages are:

- It captures history from below. This is history of the poor, the down-trodden, and the weak of the social stratum. History of the peasantry is also included in this category. Oral history enables such classes of people to tell their history as they have lived it.
- Oral history can explain a lot of things which are often missing in secondary historical accounts.

In most cases oral history is captured through oral interviews, although in some instances it can also be captured through questionnaires, but this is quite rare in History research. However, oral testimony only becomes real when it is measured against and is corroborated by other sources.

Because oral history is such an important primary source of History, it is very important that you learn how Oral history is researched. This is mostly through oral interviews. An oral interview is a face to face discussion with a respondent or interviewee so that an interviewer can obtain historical information from such a respondent. The following are the guidelines you should follow when you conduct an oral interview for purposes of obtaining historical information from a respondent.

## **Oral Interview**

### **Guidelines for writing and conducting an oral interview**

- Set a time and place where to meet your interviewee
- Write up a list of questions that you would like to ask your interviewee
- Make sure you arrive early
- It is important to explain the purpose of the interview
- Ask questions that require the interviewee to describe or narrate

- Ask the most relevant questions
- Treat the person you are interviewing with respect
- Record the interview only with interviewee's permission
- Thank the interviewee at the end of the interview
- Write a letter to the interviewee to thank them

## **Questionnaire**

Although questionnaires are rarely used in History research, it is still important that you understand how questionnaires are structured and how they are administered to obtain relevant information. This is because often History research and writing does require a multi-disciplinary approach. This makes it absolutely necessary for you to equip yourself with the relevant skills in questionnaire design and administration.

### **Definition**

The term questionnaire has many definitions. Some of these definitions are:

- A formal, written, set of closed-ended and open-ended questions that are asked of every respondent in a study. The questions may be self-administered, or interviewer-administered.
- A set of written questions, requiring written answers, which ask for information about an organization or its constituents. A questionnaire might ask for information that may be statistically useful, or it may be personal.
- A set of written questions that people respond to directly on the form itself without the aid of an interviewer.

From the definitions listed above, it can be summed up that a questionnaire is a research instrument made of several questions and other prompts in order to gather information from respondents. Although questionnaires are often designed for statistical analysis of the responses, this is not always the case.

#### **4.5.2 Advantages of Questionnaires**

- A questionnaire is an inexpensive (cheap) way to gather data from a potentially large number of respondents.

- Questionnaires are often the only feasible way to reach a large number of interviewees.
- The questionnaire sample is usually large enough to make statistical analysis possible.
- When used effectively a questionnaire can achieve very good results for the researcher.
- Questionnaires often have standardized answers that make it simpler to compile data.

However, a questionnaire should be seen as a multi-stage process of data collection. It is a means to an end not an end in itself. It begins with the definitions of aspects to be examined and ends with interpretation of the results. This involves a step by step process of data collection, analysis, interpretation and report writing. Therefore, every step in the questionnaire must be prepared well because the final results are only as good as the manner in which the questions are designed. Although questionnaires are very cheap to administer compared to other forms of data collection they are also expensive in terms of design time and interpretation.

\* Start here! Questionnaire

administration

## Types of Research Data

Data can be classified in two ways:

### 1. Subjective and Objective Data

The term **subjective** is used to describe something that exists in the mind of a person or the viewpoints or opinions of an individual person. Thus, subjective data is based on a personal perspective or personal opinion or the preferences of a person. On the other hand, **objective data** is information based on unbiased facts, like figures or numbers, which everyone has to interpret in the same manner because it is based on tested or proven scientific information.

### 2. Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Quantitative data is information mostly made up of numbers or statistics that is collected using quantitative methods (that is methods that depend on quantity to give information).

Qualitative data is information obtained from oral, written and other sources usually of a non-statistical nature. Although the information in

qualitative data may not be based on numbers or statistics, it may still have statistical data like tables of figures.

## **SECONDARY SOURCES**

### **Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources comprise data already processed and produced by others before you use it. Secondary sources provide indirect exposure, such as books or periodical articles not based on first hand observation of the event, person or place.

Secondary sources can be Qualitative or Quantitative historical data. Qualitative data normally does not involve numbers, though some numbers in form of tables can be used, whereas Quantitative data normally contain numbers e.g. the census of population statistics, birth and death figures, crop statistics etc. These are statistics that have already been interpreted by others.

Thus, a secondary source is a document or written record that relates or discusses information originally presented elsewhere or by other people. A secondary source contrasts with a primary source which is an original source of historical information. Secondary sources involve generalization, analysis synthesis, interpretation, and evaluation of the original information for purposes of writing academic papers, reports and other forms of History.

#### **4.3.2.1 Examples of Secondary Resources**

The following list, which is not exhaustive, gives some examples of secondary sources. These are: textbooks, encyclopedias, bibliographies, theses, dissertations, websites (Internet sources), journal articles (except those presenting original scientific research reports, the constitution both of which are primary sources).

There are also government reports produced by public institutions which contain valuable secondary information.

Therefore, historians should combine secondary and primary sources to enrich their writing of history. Secondary and primary sources go together in history research and writing because they are complimentary (they support each other).