MUTHOS AND LOGOS AS ORAL TRADITIONS IN GREEK HISTORIES

Dr. ‘Goke A. Akinboye
Department of Classics
University of Ibadan
Ibadan, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

In antiquity, the term historia was invented by the Greeks. Historical records were written by historians relying on various sources in much the same way that a modern historian would. To the ancients, however, there were largely two sources of historical data. One was the written sources which included documents and information, both epigraphic and numismatic. The other was the unwritten sources embraced by the terms muthos and logos, being the totality of oral testimonies about the past and now regarded as oral traditions.1 It is the aim of this paper to examine, as far as workable, the development of muthos and logos as oral traditions and attempt a portrayal of their uses in Greek histories. The paper submits that these two terms are veritable catalysts in the development of Greek historiography.

Any attempt at history2 arises out of man’s curiosity and his desire for a greater knowledge of himself and the world. It is this same desire that jolted men of the past to record the remarkable events or incidents of their own life, family, clan or country, as well as of humanity as a whole. In ancient times, the historian recorded events by depending on some material sources, which
were both written and unwritten in nature. However, the earliest historical works made use of unwritten sources, necessarily more abundant in times when the spread of writing was restricted. Among the Greeks of the early 7th and 6th centuries, the amorphous corpus of information to be first developed was their oral traditions, and these took the forms of elaborate oracles, myths, tales or legends, skilfully relayed by professional bards. Those traditions of which we have some knowledge were associated with the Homeric oral heroic tradition, but there must have been many other oral traditions that have vanished.

However, from the Herodotean age, ancient historians made use of the varied forms of oral traditions to fill in the missing gaps in their historical constructions, even though this was viewed with mixed feelings. For instance, Thucydides complained, *inter alia*, that human memory is unreliable, that chronology of incidents are sometimes inaccurate and facts are often distorted, hence his advocacy for contemporary historical writing. Thucydides, however, was much ahead of his time. He rejected the Herodotean idea that it was possible to write a narrative of events about the past, for, in his opinion, the data necessary for such enterprise did not exist and heavy reliance on oral tradition would not be a good tool. Between Thucydides and Polybius, there was a small use of documentary materials relating to the past; records of treaties, monuments, dedications, inscriptions, decisions of council or assemblies. But the situation was one in which, even for the recent past, prospective historians would have to depend too heavily on oral tradition and
folk history, all of which Thucydides labelled to muthodes (the stuff of μύθος, romance, story-telling) and refused to accept as veritable raw material for a narrative of historical events. But Herodotus, though recognising the importance of personal experience and eye-witnessing which other Classical historians, especially Thucydides, had advocated, was content to accept ‘story telling’, romance, legend and other accounts of remote past for want of an alternative. Thus, the concept of history to some historians, notably Herodotus, embraced a very broad subject-matter including geography, politics, ethnology, anthropology, sociology, psychology and mythology.

According to Brisson⁴ Plato sees muthos as essentially a traditional tale or narrative, conveying by oral means collective thinking about important but remote subjects such as gods, heroes and the origins of human civilisation. The transmission of muthoi has characteristic mode and emotional colour as well as subject matter. It is a communal experience, requiring ‘poetic’ inventiveness in the narrator and childlike responsiveness in the listener. This view of Plato is based on the way muthoi function in the Greek society.

Μύθος does seem more frequent in literary than historical and philosophical works. In Homer, it features prominently as a ‘word’, ‘speech’, ‘thought’, and sometimes a ‘tale’. Muthos appears as a mere word in Od.18.252; as things thought, unspoken word, purpose or design in Od. 4.676, cf. 777, 15.445, 19.502, cf. 11.442; as tale, story, narrative in Od. 3.94, 4.324; as conversation in Od. 4.214, 239; as public speech in Od. 1.358, 7.157.
Herodotus however, uses *muthos* as a general term to mean fiction, legend or myth, 2.45.

**MUTHOS AND LOGOS AS ORAL TRADITIONS**

In Classical antiquity, the ancient form of historical narrative was the *muthos*\(^5\). It was the traditional source of instruction for society in ethics, proper behaviour, politics, religion, geography, morality, culture, ethology and anthropology.\(^6\) The original meaning of μυθος (*muthos*) may have suggested something like “thought”. Kittel\(^7\) recently identifies some main stages of the word “thought” when it is expressed.

(a) It could be a word in the sense of ‘sayings’.

(b) It could also be a word in the sense of ‘words’.

(c) It could be an ‘account’ or ‘story’, where the main emphasis is on content.

*Muthos* can after-all be an account of facts, a rumour of unverified story, a fable which is not true but is valued for the kernel of *truth*, a fabulous account related to stories where the supernatural or gods act or plot creations. Paradoxically, *muthos* could mean the ‘word’ or ‘thought’ which is ‘a fact’ of invented story and this equals to something untrue.\(^8\) All these were accepted in the development of *muthos*.

Despite its deficiency in truth content, *muthos* had a social place in the intellectual world of ancient Greece. According to Ricoeur,\(^9\) *muthos* is ‘... not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but a traditional narration
which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men...’'. Thus myth and the mythical had an overwhelming role which penetrated every aspect of life among the Greeks.

The Greek word λόγος (logos) is a word with various meanings. Its original meaning meant ‘word’, ‘saying’ or ‘hearsay’. In another case, it can mean logic, speech, meaning, proportion, reason or rational activity. Generally in historical and philosophical works logos also appears with distinct but related meanings. In Herodotus the term means an ‘account’. In 1.19, ‘...no account was taken of the burning of the temple of Athene’. Herodotus also uses the term as calculation (for instance, of money), computation or reckoning (3.142, cf.143); measure, tale (3.99, cf. 7.9); esteem, consideration, value (for instance, the value placed on a person, 8.102, 4.135, 1.120, cf. 4.138). Logos is tale or story in Xenophon 7.1 cf. Thucyd. 1.97; Isocr. 3.27; Hdt. 1.184 cf. 106; 2.99. In philosophy, logos refers to a statement of a theory or argument (Heracl. 50; Parm.8.50; Democrit.7), law or rule (of conduct, Heracl. 72; Arist. Pol. 1286a17).

Kittel¹⁰, like Herodotus, submits that the word logos has a lot of similar relationship with terms such as ‘consideration’ (λογίζομαι), ‘account’ and ‘calculation’ (λογίσμος). Kittel further contrasts that while the term logos is used for rationally established and constructed ‘speech’, muthos refers only to ‘meaningful statements’. He further says¹¹ “…although little used in epic, logos achieved a comprehensive and varied significance with the process of rationalization which characterized the Greek spirit”.

¹⁰ Kittel
¹¹
From the 6th century, however, the Greeks of Ionia began to establish colonies in many areas of the Mediterranean and Aegean Islands; they began to ask rational questions about the epic works of Homer, Hesiod and other early writers which were in the form of muthoi (muthos). Some of these rationalists began to compile, rewrite and re-interpret the old epic traditions with better and more logical accounts, logoi (logos), and they were called logographoi (logographers). This compound word is a combination of logos and graphein (to write). The logographers differ from the mythographers as the historian from the novelists; they dealt with facts as opposed to fiction.

In the course of development of muthos and logos, logos was understood as being very similar to muthos; both terms now fall under the term ‘oral traditions’. Logos, too, can mean rumour, fable or tale. According to Greek linguistic sense, the distinction between the true and false is as little developed in relation to logos as it is in relation to muthos. Logos as meaning a true story distinct from muthos, being false, is a later though dominant development.

Plato, thinking about the truth status and functionality of myths, contrasts muthos and logos and submits that logos was far superior to muthos. A muthos is a kind of logos that is, in principle, incapable of verification. This, he believes, is because the subject matter consists neither of concrete events in the present or recent past nor of ideal or logical principles. Hence, it is incapable either of empirical or intellectual verification.

DeBeer identifies a tripartite relationship between muthos and logos. First, muthos is rendered ‘fairy tale’ as distinct from the credible story. Second,
it is the mythical form of an idea as distinct from its dialectical presentation. Third, *muthos* is the popular myth as distinct from the deeper actual meaning which can be extracted from *muthos* itself. So for the ancient historian, anything that is incredible and that cannot be methodologically verified is mythical in nature.

*Muthoi* embraced all forms of hearsay, rumour and unverified story and contrast with *logoi* which focus more on serious and factual accounts. Understandably, in general, *logos* was more highly esteemed than *muthos*; myth as a unique human ability to bestow meaning was forced into the background, and reason emerged as the sole meaning-giving agency. Prose later became the style of writing *logoi* and was associated with the word *historia* while verse was used for *muthoi*. History then meant not telling a tale but a writing or a search for knowledge, fact and truth.

**LOGOS IN OTHER CONCEPTS**

Apart from its prominence in ancient history, *logos* as shown above has varied usages in the fields of philosophy, rhetoric, analytical psychology and religion. In ancient philosophy, *logos* was first used by Heraclitus, one of the most eminent pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, to describe the inherent order in the universe. *Logos* means the order of reality which ordinary people seemed to be unaware of. It is the ‘way things are’, the totality of the ‘laws of nature’ in the modern sense, and, as such, it is always universal (κόσμος, the common); universal across cultures though understood differently in each culture. Heraclitus also used *logos* to mean the undifferentiated material substance
from which all things came: ‘Listening not to me but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that all are *one*’. Hence, *logos* is Heraclitus’ answer to the pre-Socratic question of what the beginning of all things is. By the time of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, *logos* was the term used to describe the faculty of human reason and the knowledge men had of the world and of each other. Plato allowed his characters to engage in the conceit of describing *logos* as a living being in some of his dialogues. Aristotle further developed the concept of *logic* as a depletion of the rules of human rationality.

In the 3rd century, the Stoics borrowed the idea of *logos* and used it for the immanent ordering principle of the universe, represented by humankind’s ordered discourse at the level of language use. Nature and *logos* are then treated as one and the same, but *logos* is nature’s overall rational structure, and not all natural creatures have *logos* within them.

In rhetoric, *logos* is one of the three modes of persuasion – the other two are *pathos* which appeals to emotion and *ethos*, the qualification of the speaker. *Logos* here refers to logical appeal and, in fact, the term *logic* evolved from it.

In Christianity, the New Testament Gospel of St. John gives a central place to *logos*. It is usually translated as ‘the Word’. In English Bibles (for instance, the King James Version), Apostle John describes the *Logos* as God, the Creative Word who took on flesh in the man, Jesus Christ. John 1:1 reads: ‘In the beginning was the word (*logos*), and the Word (*logos*) was with God, and the Word (*logos*) was God’. 
Also, within Eastern religions, there are some concepts which have similar parallels with regard to the philosophical and Christian uses of the term *logos*. Logos is identified with *Tao*, the Vedic notion of *rta*, the Hindu and Buddhist conception of *dharma*, *Aum* and the Egyptian *Maât*. These are all terms of various cultures that have the meaning of *logos*; the order and orderliness of the world and, at the same time, the material source of the world.

**ORAL TRADITIONS IN GREEK HISTORIES**

According to Vansima,\(^{17}\) oral traditions refers to the totality of all oral or verbal testimonies, messages, reports, stories or information about the past that are transmitted from mouth to mouth from one generation to another. It may take varied forms such as *muthos* or *logos*, but it usually appears as oral statements, reported about the remote or immediate past. One characteristic feature of oral traditions is that it applies to both a *process* and its *products*.\(^ {18}\) By a process, we mean the transmission of stories by words of mouth over time; that is, the going of messages from one informant’s mouth to another. With use, the messages linger on beyond the lifetime of the original informant, reporter, storyteller or *hearsayer*. It then means that overtime each rendered story would differ\(^ {19}\) either in content, context or colour according to its position in the whole process, hence its product. Messages of oral traditions, as the term auto-suggests, are orally relayed as eye-witness accounts among the Greeks, embracing also terms such as oracles or soothsaying. The Greeks conceived the oral traditions as an ideal medium for promoting Pan-Hellenic
sentiments, justifying aristocratic rule of well-sired families and edifying the socio-cultural aspect of the life of every Greek.\textsuperscript{20}

Before we survey the evidence of oral traditions in the development of historiographical narratives of the Greek past, it is needful to take a brief look at the common motif behind the writing of those narratives. We can categorise the motif into five based on writing style or subject.\textsuperscript{21} The first category embraced histories which were concerned with the human interest of the story they had to construct. Herodotus’ \textit{Histories} took the lead here for he said that he wrote to:

\begin{quote}
... preserve on record, the memory of the past events in human history, to prevent the great and wonderful doings of both Greeks and barbarians from losing their fame...\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

Herodotus is always fascinated by people, and throughout his \textit{Histories} it is evident that he had his portrait-gallery filled with stories about Polycrates and Cambyses, Themistocles, Xerxes and the rest. The second motif was esteemed by historians who moralised their work. In this category, Xenophon is the supreme exemplar. With the historian, history is a source-book for ethical precept. Thucydides shares a bit of this for he avoids biography and makes politics, not people, his subject.

We also have the third category which are works of propaganda. The propaganda element is more evident among the Roman writers of historiography, yet it is there in Herodotus, for his favour to the Athenians is easy to account for. His whole work is a defence of the freedom of Greece against the despotism of Persia. The \textit{Anabasis} and \textit{Hellenica} of Xenophon were
written partly for self-glorification and justification. The fourth category is histories written with the motif of tracking facts for facts’ sake. Here belong the works of Atthidographers and other local historians who influenced the scientific approach of Aristotle and the Peripatetics, who applied the patient, clinical Hippocratic collection of case histories to other branches of human knowledge. Finally, there are histories written with the motif of presenting the truth of the past in order that the future may learn from it. Here we have the works of the two greatest historians of the Graeco-Roman period, Thucydides and Polybius. The fact that Thucydides claims that his work is a ‘permanent possession’ shows that it was written not for the uncritical minds or audience of Herodotus’ *Histories*, but to provide a lasting work of reference to politicians.

It now remains for me to survey the treatment of oral traditions in the narratives of ancient Greek histories. The first historians, like the first poets of Greece, do not judge narratives according to the criterion of their empirical truth. Or, more exactly, the narrative rejected as oral tradition does not correspond to a specific category or denomination. When Hecateus\(^2\) of Miletus, in writing his work, pragmatically opposes what he presents in writing to common views held by Greeks, he not only claims to present what is simply likely (*...I write what I deem true; for the stories of the Greeks are manifold and seems to me ridiculous*).\(^2\) This is said in lieu of claiming responsibility directly for the truth, but overall he uses the verb *mutheisthai* to describe his own activity in order to preserve the term *logoi* for the risible narratives of the early Greeks.\(^2\) Hecateus was the first historian who wrote a serious prose history
but the *Histories* gave so much symbolic account on Greek mythology and oral traditions that its critical principles left too much to be desired as a work of history. His attitude towards the oral traditions was a product of a comparative study of facts and fiction. His data were all a half-scientific treatise which fantastically blended oral traditions with geography, ethnography and history.²⁶

Just as for Hecateus, there exists for Herodotus neither a word nor a category reserved for fictive stories. He hardly employs the term *muthos*. This is an essential observation for reflection centred on designation and qualification in one’s own culture of the narratives of exotic civilisations. Herodotus had written about struggles between the East and the West in which he traced back to the mythical origins, the manners of nearly all nations of the then known world. While writing, he reserves no term for defining the narratives of the foreign traditions. For the story of Cyrus, for instance, Herodotus has four different versions told by the Persians; all these stories are presented as *logoi*. Among them, Herodotus only recounts the *logos* that avoids exaggerated praise of the Great King.

Herodotus’ liberty Greek by others as well as written materials kept in temples and famous shrines like the Delphic shrine.²⁷ His second type of data or sources was, by far, the largest and it consisted of information collected in the course of the *fieldwork* interviews (literally, τὸ ἐν τοῖς ἀγροῖς ἐργον) with Greeks and non-Greeks. This was where his oral traditions belonged. The last kind of data was the archaeological materials which were in forms of artefacts,
old temples, and shrines which were themselves monuments of historical interest and other war monuments like wrecked ships or memorials of departed soldiers.\textsuperscript{28} Rightly noted, the mass of Herodotus’ data was a collection of what people said and this was got from various channels. There were stories he received from priests, traditional legends and tales from travellers and other witnesses who lived during the stirring times of war.\textsuperscript{29} He drew from the oral traditions of many prominent people and families. For instance, in Athens, Herodotus tapped into the traditions of the Alcmaeonidae family to which Pericles belonged on his maternal side.

Oral traditions of non-Greeks were usually explained to Herodotus by interpreters and these he treated as \textit{logoi} since interpreters could be biased.\textsuperscript{30} Bonnard\textsuperscript{31} cites exclusively various instances where Herodotus received interpretations of inscriptions on Egyptian temple walls through third parties. Further on, Herodotus paid visits to Scythian royal tombs,\textsuperscript{32} Egyptian embalmers’ shops,\textsuperscript{33} and Hercules’ temples at Tyre and Thasos.\textsuperscript{34} Indeed, oracular information from Delphi, Dodona, Olympia, Samos and other places abound in Herodotus.\textsuperscript{35} All these overtly gave Herodotus’ work serious touches of oralities and religion.

According to Parke,\textsuperscript{36} oracles are generally regarded as formal oral accounts from gods, and are usually given as answers to consultations or else the places where such consultations are made. The clients could be an individual as in the case of Herodotus himself or a state like the Apollonians who consulted the Dodona and Delphic oracles over the plague of their land.\textsuperscript{37}
Oracular subjects varied as much as the methods by which the answers were passed down to clients. In a similar vein, the priests or prophets who gave answers to the consultations were of many kinds, ranging from the custodian of an oracular office duly recognised by the state to a private individual who had the reputation for clearly interpreting signs and omens.\(^{38}\) It was no joke at all that Herodotus’ great interest in oracles and stories almost misled his work. The story he puts down about King Croesus lends some credence to this:

> He cogitated, and then promptly sent messages in different directions to test the oracles in Greece and Africa, some to Delphi, some to Abae in Phocis, some to Dodona….These were Greek oracles to which Croesus sent messengers for consultations; he dispatched others to the oracle of Amum in Africa to make enquiries.\(^{39}\)

However, Herodotus displays a great ingenuity in the way he collated, arranged and worked out these stories. Even if he places in doubt the reality of an event in a particular story he recounts, he does not then try to restore the truth. Instead, as Calame\(^{40}\) rightly states, he, by expressing his own view, exposes the consequences that the event in question would have had if it has indeed been real. He is content to express his own reservations about the truth of the story he had told and invites the audience to suspend their judgement as he has done. Even if the visual evidence seems to support and confirm the received oral and aural account, the truth of a story, Herodotus believes, is the domain of the gods alone and man must be content with the plausible. Hence, he betrays a curious combination of scepticisms and credulity and this ambivalence is well attested to in phrases such as:
I neither absolutely believe nor disbelieve.\(^{41}\)

I am bound to state what is said but I am not bound to believe it.\(^{42}\)

But whether a given story or report is true, plausible or false, with Herodotus we regularly find ourselves in the domain of *logos* and *legein*; except on occasions where *muthos* is used to designate an implausible narrative. Centuries after, the same attitude is embraced in many other histories, especially in the writings of Pausanias where the word *muthos* is used with the general sense of *story* without pejorative connotations.

Perhaps, the most paradoxical use of *muthos* and *logos* as oral traditions in the Classical age is found in a celebrated passage of the *Wasps* of Aristophanes where the endless misunderstandings between the sensible enemy of Cleon and the ridiculous Heliast, his friend, finally end with recourse to the narration of histories (*logous legein*). The first speaker has demanded that the second should pronounce serious discourse meant for an educated and enlightened public, but the second responds with series of funny anecdotes and fables in the manner of *Aesop*; and the first man replies that the second man has spoken nothing but *muthoi*. In speaking of *logoi* drawn from everyday life, Calame again\(^{43}\) notes that the second man has expected histories relating to a political career or brief exploits, while *muthoi*, on the other hand, are for him trifles.

By the 4th century, the terms *muthos* and *logos* had developed as important fabrics of Greek oral traditions and were employed by Greek orators
with certain usages that overlapped with our modern concepts of oral traditions. For example, Demosthenes employs *muthoi* in two different senses. One refers to those discourses which are baseless stories like those told by Heliast, friend of Cleon, and which Demosthenes defines in parallel by the term *logoi*. The other is used to designate those narratives relating to the ‘heroic order’, that is, to a legendary past, the truth-value of which is never in doubt. In a funerary speech, Calame\(^4^4\) explains that there is no reason to put into question the veracity of the battles undertaken by the Athenians against the Amazons or against Eumolpus, king of Eleusis. *Muthos* is never used here to refer to the legendary past joined with an assertion of the fictional nature of the story defined as such; this holds true for other minor historians like Isocrates who classifies as *muthoi*, narratives of the Trojan and Persian wars both of which are exemplary of the hatred felt by the Greeks for the Persians.\(^4^5\)

**Conclusion**

No doubt, the task of rewriting the past of any culture is for historians a formidable one. This paper has shown that the occupation of the first Greek historiographers was to reach back to beginnings by aiming at nothing but the *truth*. This required the dexterity of combining both legendary past events (*muthoi*) and more recent events (*logoi*) that can be easily verified into the continuity of a homogenous chronology. These concepts served as catalyst for the development of a rational historiography. The result of such an effort of rationalisation of the legendary past of the Greeks’ culture did not end with consignment of certain materials to the category of the fictive, nor the
development of a different class of myths, but the formation of a continual temporal succession that made the heroes of legend the real founders of the present. It was in this unique line that oral traditions developed among early Greek historiographers from its crude take off as muthoi and logoi. And as it has been recently observed, Herodotus, the father of history himself, believed in the potency of various kinds of muthoi and logoi as a veritable source for historical constructions and he it was who deserved the credit for taking the first leap at rationalising the irrational.

Endnotes

3 Ibid p.3.
4 Brisson L. 1982, Platon les mots et les mythes (Textes à l’appui), Maspero, Paris, p.238. The book explores the language in which Plato discusses myth and related topics, hence, the mots in the title.
5 Ibid p.17.
6 Ibid pp.19, 40.
10 Kittel G. op. cit., pp.73-75.
11 Ibid p.77.
13 Brisson 1982, op.cit. see also Brisson L. Plato, the myth maker, ed. & trans. By Gerald Naddaf, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
15 Shotwell op. cit pp.20, 179-172.
16 Ibid pp.167-176.
18 Vansima J. Ibid.
20 Rostovtzeef M. op. cit. pp.44, 100.
22 Herodotus I.1
23 Two fragments of Hecateus’ works survived – Travels round the world and Genealogies.
24 Shotwell J. op. cit. p.170.
27 Cf. Herodotus II. 100-103
28 Herodotus II. 44; VIII. 121-122.
29 Rostovtzeef M. *op. cit* pp.187-188.
32 Herodotus IV 71
33 Bonnard A. *Ibid*.
34 Herodotus IX 122-123
35 CAH Vol. V. p.416. Herodotus I. 13, I.19-21 at Alyattes; II 53-55 at Dodona; IX 93, V.1, VII. 111 at Thracian Dionysus; VIII 20, VIII. 77 at Bacis, etc.
37 Herodotus IX. 93
38 Parke H.W. *op. cit* p.10.
39 Herodotus I.46.
40 Calame C. *op. cit* p.15.
41 Herodotus IV 96
42 Herodotus VII 142
43 Calame *op. cit* pp.16-17
44 *Ibid* p.18
45 *Ibid*
47 cf. Herodotus VIII 77.

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