

## **UNDERSTANDING OF HISTORY AND SOME OF ITS PROGRAMMES IN MALAYSIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Evidence shows that not all documented records are thorough and adequately recorded. Gaps still exist in history. Collections of personal papers may be weak in the information on the formative years of the donors. Letters or correspondence do not necessarily portray an author's inner thoughts and may be misleading to the researchers. It is within this context that oral history is regarded and is a necessity rather than a luxury and indeed a help in dealing with the modern mountain of paper.*

**Keywords:** Oral history; Interviews; Research methodology

### **INTRODUCTION**

Oral history is important because it helps to record events or a course of events of human beings, not yet recorded in the formal way. No nation could claim that they have all their history recorded. Numerous past experiences and information are still embedded in the memories of individuals and if concerted effort is not made to unravel these memories through oral interview, valuable information, hints, clues and some non-verbal information would indeed be lost forever. It provides a highly significant perspectives that do not appear on papers.

### **DEFINITION**

The World Book Dictionary describes oral history as, lithe collection and opinion of important contemporary persons concerning historical events in which they participated usually in the form of tape-recorded interviews. According to the Committee on Oral History National Archives of Malaysia, "Oral history relates to the techniques of eliciting the reminiscences of selected individuals through recorded interview sessions. The individuals selected are those considered best able to provide such information as derived from their personal involvement and experience of historical events; from their special relationship with particular personality, or the bearing that specific period in history may have had on their lives.

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The recorded interviews, when transcribed allows for the convenient use of oral history as both research as well as teaching material. From both definitions, it could be summarized that oral history involves:

- a. Historical data of the recollections of persons derived through usually
- b. tape-recorded interviews
- c. The data are gathered and preserved
- d. An account of historical in nature would be based on these data.

Non-elite refers to individuals or ordinary citizens within the society who are involved in historical events. They may be ordinary wage earners, government and private employees, teachers, soldiers, peasants, vendors or housewives. The elite on the other hand, are the political, economic, social, cultural, ecclesiastical, diplomatic, judicial and military leaders of the country. With this explanation, it would not be surprising that the scope of the oral history programme is very wide and the potential of recounting history is encouraging, provided the projects are undertaken seriously.

#### **OBJECTIVES**

- i. To record for posterity the memories of elite or non-elite through oral history interviews on sound tapes.
- ii. To create oral history materials as primary source of information

#### **SCOPE**

Oral history is not confined to history as thought by many people. It encompasses multi-disciplinary areas, covering a wide spectrum of topics as listed below. As reported by Azemi, the National Archives oral history projects have interviewed veteran statesmen, experienced civil servants, eminent politicians, distinguished military officers, culturist, musicians and artists. However, their selection is not necessarily based on their personalities since the non-elite are also included depending on the relevance of the subject by virtue of their being a participant or observer:

- a. Biographies of selected individual
- b. Local history
- c. Administration
- d. Culture
- e. Economy

- f. Literature
- g. Sociology
- h. Medical
- i. Music
- j. Science and technology
- k. Episodes in history
- l. Performing arts
- m. Visual arts
- n. Administrative history
- o. Women studies

#### **GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES**

It is also worth noting here that the interview projects are not limited within the Malaysian boundaries. It has extended to the neighboring countries or those closely involved with our history. One example is Great Britain where interviews with expatriate officers or their spouses are conducted to record the valuable memories. The following list the geographical areas:

- a. Localized to districts/ states
- b. The nation s a whole
- c. Across the boundaries (Other significant countries abroad).
- d. Special projects, such as USM's project on North of Malaysia.

#### **USERS OF ORAL HISTORY**

There are two types of users:

- a. Academic, student, journalist or specialized users who know what information they need.
- b. Non-users who are not aware of the potentials of oral history information. They may also be students, the public's or any other specialized users.

It would not be difficult to serve the first type of users because what they need most are the finding aids. It is the second category of users who need a lot of promotion. It is well known that the cost for the oral history project may be high and as such it should be fully utilized for scholarship purposes to also ensure cost effectiveness.

#### **ORAL HISTORY DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA**

During the earlier stages, oral history activities were undertaken as an ad-hoc programme by institutions, but these institutions had their own objectives. The oral

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history programmes are presently more systematic and well defined. The 1978 colloquium by South East Asian Regional Branch of International Conference on Archives (SARBICA) was significant in that the recommendations provide useful guidelines and promotions for the development of oral history. Subsequently, more conferences of the same nature were held in different venues within the ASEAN region. What follows was the setting up of a National Committee on Oral History, in 1979 with the objectives of:

- a. Encouraging and coordinating activities related to oral history carried out by any institution or individual.
- b. Encouraging and nurturing cooperation in the oral history activities by various people or agencies.
- c. Providing advice, views and recommendation to those involved, if requested.

#### **INSTITUTIONS INVOLVED**

Some of the institutions that are involved in oral history activities are:

- a. Kedah State Museum Board
- b. Kedah State Public Library
- c. Kuala Lumpur Memorial
- d. Malayan Historical Society Negeri Sembilan Branch, Terengganu Branch
- e. Ministry of Culture and Tourism
- f. National Archives of Malaysia
- g. Pahang State Museum Board
- h. Sarawak Museum
- i. Terengganu State Museum Board
- j. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
- k. Universiti Sains Malaysia

The activities are carried out by full-time and part-time staff as well as students. A number of institutions have trained their personnel.

#### **SOME PROJECTS THAT HAVE BEEN UNDERTAKEN**

The first oral history project was launched by the National Archives of Malaysia in 1963 with no standard procedure. With the setting up of the Oral history Unit, a more systematic and standard approach was taken, making it the prime mover of oral history activities in Malaysia. The National Archives, through its activities, is

instrumental in promoting and popularizing the oral tradition. The two well-known programmes are:

1. Recounting the past - A live narrating session in front of an audience. One interesting point here is that the audience participate in the interviews and each session may last from 3 to 4 hours and are recorded on video and audio tapes for research purposes.
2. Once upon an event - This programme is telecast over radio and television, involving a narrator who recounts his memories, and an audience of young students acting as interviewers. Such creativity in popularizing oral history has indeed provided an avenue to create a critical mind among the children, other than provide some excitement in history.

The National Archives of Malaysia has published a number of catalogues, listing the names of the oral history projects it has undertaken. Two examples of the catalogues are:

- a. *Katalog Wawancara Sejarah Lisan Arkib Negara Malaysia* (Siri Sejarah Lisan ), 1991
- b. *Menegakkan Kedaulatan Negara* (Siri Sejarah Lisan), 1991.

Another important publication by the National Archives is the *Handbook on Oral History*, published in 1991. It is a must for those interested in documenting oral history.

### **SIGNIFICANCE**

Information reminiscenced by participants and observers of events could be used to complement written documents and this technique has become a modern research tool. Oral history information could give the impressions of specific events, background causes that motivate certain action, the actual mood of the society at that time, all of which may not be written in a published account. Such information could indeed add to the beauty of and understanding on certain subjects or events. In fact, on the basis of this information, some researchers could even make assumptions that certain events that have occurred could have been avoided. More people would use oral history information, not only to add or support the written documents but also to enjoy a picturesque description of history. According to Charles Morrissey, "recorded memoirs can test the authenticity of the official: history embodied in self-serving records created possibly to obscure the realities of decision makings in the past". If files appear to have been weeded in order to remove items that displeased people involved in past decisions, an oral historian can inquire about the removal. If

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files suggest that other papers exist elsewhere, an oral historian can try to locate them. So, too, a historian trying to separate the actuality of past events from the mythology that subsequently may have encased them can tell interviewees what the records contain and ask them to elaborate on the interpretation that emerges from archival research." In short, like papers, oral history may offer slanted views of events and people. However, it could document current events in a manner that traditional archival collection could not. Various gaps that exist in some papers could be filled by oral history while at the same time helps to create a resource of escalating value with the passing years.

However, it is also worth mentioning about some reservations that could be considered when referring to oral history materials. Oral information should not be the alternative for written documents. Critical aspects of reliability, validity and the representative nature of oral history are essential elements to be considered. One could also question the accuracy of the memory or the intrusion of subjectivity or social bias. A good interviewer could help overcome some of the problems.

Oral history materials, unlike other traditional sources, are created after the fact by the historians, useful in preserving the nation's historical heritage. With the lack of original sources and the tradition of noting records such as diaries, oral history could play an important part in supplementing the nonofficial sources.

#### **TO THE HISTORIAN**

The role of oral history is important in the study of history, especially within the context of national history where written documents are either scarce or unavailable. Its role in filling the gaps created by the published documents is well known, although researchers are made aware of the characteristics of oral history information. It could indeed supplement published or unpublished materials, not only for historical research, but also for scholars undertaking other general research.

Generally, oral history projects are undertaken to provide information for:

- a. Individual research
- b. To meet institutional objectives
- c. To serve the public, and
- d. To serve specific research

### **TO THE INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS**

Perhaps, oral history has always been more associated with history and the obvious reason lies behind the terminology itself. However, it is also interesting to note that oral history is indeed a form of information and as such, falls within the boundaries of information resources. Information professionals are interested in any form of information because they serve the needs of users who may consist of different groups and seeking different types of information. Therefore, information professionals would not only have to know the kind of information, but also know the sources and access tools so that they are able to provide the right referral services. Some libraries even undertake oral history projects.

Looking at this material as a source of primary information, oral history has been accepted by researchers and historians as valuable additional references for research. In fact, a number of universities use oral history as a primary source of information. The collection of the oral history projects has indeed contributed to the enrichment of information in the collection of archives and manuscript repository, in addition to documents, publications and newspapers. Information professionals could help in the promotion of the oral history materials, provided they are made aware of the existence of the materials. In short, oral history projects should be well transcribed, indexed and disseminated.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Oral history project involves the communication process, the ability to operate and maintain recording techniques, recording equipments and also human factors.

1. Oral history methodology essentially follows a structured interview with the potential interviewees on sound tapes.
2. Pre-interview research is crucial, especially to those not familiar with certain subject.
3. Interview is conducted in a language that the interviewee is most comfortable with.

### **FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT**

Of great importance to a successful oral history project is the planning stage. It is crucial to identify and determine the nature of the project, the budget allocation, staffing and time. A successful oral history would demand extensive research through the available papers of individuals or the records of the organization.

The recommended team in charge of the oral history programme is as follows:

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1. Consists of those with subjects specialisation in related areas such as history, political science, sociology, economics and many others
2. Has experience in oral history for elite and non-elite interviews.
3. Be responsible in planning, coordinating and carrying out the interviews.
4. Could identify interviewees and apply the right way in approaching them.
5. Would review the development and progress of interviews.
6. Edit and publish a catalogue containing synopsis in English and identify a way of disseminating the information to the researchers.

Ideally, the services of a full-time oral historian with an ability and time to implement broad-based interviews would help in designing a successful oral history projects that could provide pertinent information for research.

#### **ORAL HISTORY PROCESS**

There are basically three levels of processes that have to be undertaken. They are, selection and listing the names of individuals to be interviewed; interview and data collection; and data processing and the preparation of finding aids.

#### **DATA PROCESSING AND THE PREPARATION OF FINDING AIDS**

The end product of the oral history project is not oral or history, but a typed transcript of what is being recounted by an interviewee which would undergo the process of editing, indexing, and binding.

#### **INTERVIEWING GUIDE-LINES**

To achieve optimum results there are some tips that have to be followed by the interviewers as recommended by the *Handbook on Oral History* namely:

1. Interview Venue
  - a. Rooms or other area that would not be hindered by noise
  - b. Equipments
  - c. Conduciveness
2. Mannerism and dressing
  - a. Well-mannered and well-dressed, to gain rapport and confidence of the interviewees.
  - b. Good manners and sensitive to cultural and ethnic values,



respect of elders and show appreciation.

### 3. Interview Process

- a. Not only maintaining the dialogue but also encouraging responses; narrating the life history or recounting past experiences; or deal with a specific theme. The interview show motivate and encourage the interviewees to give as much information and details.
- b. Invite open-ended responses. Therefore, open-ended questions should be posed, like why, how, where or what .
- c. Limit to one question at a time to avoid confusion.
- d. Begin with a simple question before probing on to more difficult questions.
- e. Be accommodating to slow interviewees.
- f. Questions should be well understood.
- g. Able to redirect to the main subject if deviation occurs.
- h. Vague memory is very common and interviewer should be able to help form a mental impression of the person.
- i. Questions like, "where were you at that time" or "How did the newspaper reports", may ensure accuracy of the information by the interviewees.
- j. Also inform of alternative information that is available by saying " I have heard that" or "I have read that" . Sometimes more details could be given by the interviewees from such method.
- k. Record the interview without pause. Assure interviewee of the confidentiality of certain statements if so requested.
- l. Limit the session to two hours to avoid exhaustion.

The interviewer should not cut the interviewees by making comments or interjecting. Also it is not recommended to challenge the validity of the information, avoid showing that you are too knowledgeable on the subject. In short the interviewer should limit to asking questions and encouraging responses.

### **PREPARATION OF TRANSCRIPT AND DISSEMINATION OF ORAL HISTORY INFORMATION**

After the interview, the tape would be reproduced and transcriptions are prepared. The transcription would be the important part of oral documentation.

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The move towards increasing the oral history programmes and projects could lead to an explosion of this information in the repositories. However, one of the problem is how to promote researchers and users to consult these materials or how to reach the non or passive users who are unaware of the potential of oral history information.

There is numerous methods that could be employed to reach these groups. One such method is the audio-visual method especially via television which is an effective means of visual communication. It is a necessary medium for an effective dissemination of oral history. For example, the National Archives programmes could be broadcasted over the television and radio stations.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- i. The public should be made more aware of the importance of oral history. Activities undertaken by the National Archives of Malaysia should be continued and projected more in the mass media, especially television.
- ii. Oral history projects should be encouraged and promoted by institutions or individuals. Oral history projects could also be done on a joint venture basis. Project could be adopted systematically according to the chronological order, based on topical subjects.
- iii. The educational system should accommodate at appropriate levels the importance of oral history information and students should be encouraged to use them.
- iv. The public at large should also be made aware of oral history through talks and lectures.
- v. In order to disseminate the oral history information as well as to ensure no duplication, the projects should be well-documented and widely distributed to various institutions, especial institutions of higher learnings. This could be done by having a union catalogue of all completed projects and findings aids such as lists or indexes.
- vi. A main depositor with up-to date technology and manned by professional staff should be set up.
- vii. The ramification of video recording of oral history interviews which would help in understanding the non-verbal elements of the interview, interviewees appearance and body language.
- viii. Oral history should not be limited to the elite but also ordinary citizens who were involved in the episodes or events.
- ix. Concerted efforts by historical societies should be made to participate in oral history projects.

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## **CONCLUSION**

Oral history information is an information source and therefore has to be utilized by those involved in research, particularly historical research, and also by those who handle information. It would be worth mentioning that oral history could contribute to other areas, including science, agriculture and medicine. It has the potential of recounting information secrets kept in the memories of individuals or groups. The responsibility of the documentation of oral history should fall on everyone. More institutions are undertaking oral history projects and some have joined forces with the National Archives of Malaysia. Given the situation where the public is aware of the importance of oral history, we could expect more hidden information would be uncovered and help fill the gaps that still exists among the published documents