The National Museum’s oral history projects

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The subject of history and how historians approach, interpret and perceive history is constantly changing. The most notable change in historians’ approach to the past came with the emergence of the oral history method. South African historians are catching up with what is currently happening to history in the rest of the world. What is more, Africa and its strong oral history tradition is particularly fertile soil for oral historians. Recently the National Museum identified oral history as not only an important tool to unlock the past, but also as a new research direction in history. We still value documents, but now we also listen to voices – especially the voices of ordinary people. And there are many voices: the dead who were never heard before and also the living who will probably never be heard.

What is Oral History?
Oral history may be broadly defined as the process of collecting spoken memories and personal opinions of historical significance, by means of recorded interviews. Oral history is actually an umbrella term that includes both oral testimonies and oral traditions. Oral testimonies are the personal memories of people about what has happened in their own lives, as well as their views on life. Here the focus is mostly on life histories and eyewitness accounts.

Oral traditions, on the other hand, are the formal official record of the history of a community. Oral traditions are particularly important in the African context and through the centuries they have developed into a fine art form. As a result, oral traditions may be sub-divided into two separate categories, namely epic tales and praise poetry. Epic tales include myths, legends, fables and folk tales. Praise poems, mostly performed by praise-singers, may take the form of proverbs, war cries and the praising of knuckle-bones.

An oral history interview usually involves an interviewer questioning an interviewee or narrator while recording it on cassette and/or videotape. The interviewer normally uses a prepared questionnaire as a guide to structure the interview process. Proper preparation for an interview is essential, because that will guide the eventual outcome of the interview. The interviewer plays the role of facilitator and should not talk much. The duty of the interviewer is not only to obtain the required information from the interviewee, but also to listen. Therefore, oral history is as much about the interviewing process as it is about the end product, i.e. the recorded information.

Why Oral History?
The well-known British oral historian, Paul Thompson, argues that the value of history and the study thereof ultimately depends on its social purpose. This is certainly true for oral history. Oral history has become an important tool for collecting information because it records previously unrecorded history. It therefore fills in the gaps that exist in our social memory. This is particularly important in post-apartheid South Africa where it is necessary to reconstruct a painful past. In the absence of documents, oral history provides new sources of information as either an alternative or a complement to the existing documents. Thus, oral history gives a voice to those who were never heard.
There is, however, another reason why oral history is important and this refers to its value on a socio-political and personal level. For most oral historians, oral history is about more than just recording histories. When done skillfully and sensitively, oral history empowers individuals and certain social groups through the process of remembering and re-interpreting the past. It can also be argued that the unique methods of oral history inculcate the skills of listening and empathy across racial lines. People from different walks of life are encouraged to listen to one another. In this regard oral history also gives a voice (and a listening ear) to those ordinary people who will probably otherwise never be heard.

Oral History and Community History

Oral history is particularly suited for the recovery of community and local history. Community history may be defined as the stories, traditions, customs and experiences of the members of a community. This type of local history is important, because it can contribute detailed knowledge to the study of wider historical subjects. How do community members experience and cope with change? How do ordinary people cope with natural disasters such as floods and droughts? These and other questions need to be asked when a community’s past is being investigated, and it seems that the most effective way to do it is the oral history technique. Orally communicated history reveals the human side of the past by also showing how historical events can alter the course of an individual’s life.

The National Museum and Oral History

The National Museum acknowledges the importance of oral history, especially its value as a tool to investigate community or local history. Therefore, the Museum recently launched a number of projects that will employ the oral history technique as a primary means of research.

The Batho Community History Project

The Batho Community History Project is a long-term project that aims primarily to collect information on the social, cultural and political history of the greater Batho-area by means of oral history. The township known as Batho is of great significance for Bloemfontein and Mangaung. It is not only one of the oldest existing townships, but also has a rich social and political history. A secondary aim of the project is to canvass photographs and artifacts of historical significance. The information recorded and collected will be used for future research, display and educational purposes.

The Bram and Ella Fischer Project

Bram Fischer is a well-known figure in South African politics, but lesser known is the special relationship he had with his mother, Ella. With this project the focus will be on a more personal aspect of the Bram Fischer enigma and oral history will be used to gain new insights into Bram and his relationship with his mother. How much did Ella know of Bram’s communist activities? If so, did she approve of it? These and other questions are asked and with the information gained we hope to shed more light on a hitherto unknown subject. Oral history interviews have already been conducted with Bram’s two daughters, Ruth Rice and Ilse Wilson, as well as with two of his second cousins.

The African Living Heritage Project

This smaller project focuses on African living heritage and the aim is to collect oral histories around the social and cultural practices of the Free State’s African population. Here the focus is on traditional food and cooking, households, building practices and, of course, oral tradition in general. Recently one of the Museum’s staff members, Mittah Ngelayke, was trained in basic oral history methods. Her first oral history interview was with a Basotho woman who explained in detail how a traditional dung floor is smeared.

Oral history has its strengths, but is certainly not flawless and the Museum is therefore careful to follow a balanced approach in its research. To ensure a scientific approach to studying history it is essential that oral history records, whenever possible, be verified by existing documentary evidence. We believe that both documentary and oral evidence are essential in creating a complete historical account.

References


