

The Centre for Civil Society

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 4041, South Africa

Telephone: +27 31 260 3577 Fax: +27 (0)31 260 2502

Website www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/ e-mail: ccs@ukzn.ac.za

DURBAN SINGS

Audio reports, songs and stories

From KwaZulu-Natal; Durban and Gauteng; Johannesburg: Azania.

Oral History Guideline Booklet

Prepared by Molefi Mafereka Ndlovu

Table of Contents

- Introduction
- What Is Oral History
- Memory & History
- Is All Recording Oral History
- Where To Start
- Guides & Policies
- Establishing A Project
- Research
- Mapping Memory
- Who Shall I Interview?
- Approaching People & Arranging Interviews
- Interviewing People



- Preparing Questions
- The Interview
- Equipment
- After the Interview
- Processing Oral History Interviews
- Transcribing
- Interview Summaries
- Interview Logs
- Interviewee's Involvement
- Telling Other People
- Presenting Oral History
- Making History From Life Stories
- What Happened To My Words?
- Collection & Storage
- Concluding Comments

Introduction

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people ... It brings history into, and out of, the community. It helps the less privileged, and especially the old, towards dignity and self-confidence. It makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations. And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time ...oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgment inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for a radical transformation of the social meaning of history. Paul Thompson, *the Voice of the Past Oral History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1978, p18.

1 What is Oral History?

Oral History can be defined as a compilation of historical data through interviews, usually tape-recorded and sometimes videotaped, with participants in, or observers of, significant events or times. Primitive societies have long relied on oral tradition to preserve a record of the past in the absence of written histories. The modern concept of oral history was developed in the 1940s by Allan [Ne vins](#) and his associates at Columbia Univ. In creating oral histories, interviews are conducted to obtain information from different perspectives, many of which are often unavailable from written sources. Such materials provide data on individuals, families, important events, or day-to-day life.

The discipline came into its own in the 1960s and early 70s when inexpensive tape recorders were available to document such rising social movements as civil rights, feminism, and anti-Vietnam War protest. Authors such as Studs Terkel, Alex Haley, and Oscar [Lewis](#) have employed oral history in their books, many of which are largely based on interviews. In another important example of the genre, a massive archive covering the oral history of American music has been compiled at the Yale School of Music. By the end of the 20th cent., oral history had become a respected discipline in many colleges and universities. At that time the Italian historian Alessandro Portelli and his associates began to study the role that memory itself, whether

accurate or faulty, plays in the themes and structures of oral history. Their published work has since become standard material in the field, and many oral historians now include in their research the study of the subjective memory of the persons they interview.

See S. Caunce, *Oral History* (1994); V. R. Yow, *Recording Oral History* (1994), R. Perks and A. Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (repr. 1998).

Oral history relates both to the personal stories and memories that people tell other people about the past and the formal collection or account of such stories and memories by oral historians and researchers. Within families often such stories are passed on from generation to generation. More frequently our history lives as a personal narrative remembered and told inside our own head. Impressions we retain and are able to recall. These memories can help us explain our identity and place in the world.

The Oral History can be defined in two-part regarding oral history; as a practice or method, for recording, processing and conserving oral accounts of the past. It highlights the importance of the background knowledge, or preparedness of the interviewer, and an interviewee that has direct experience and knowledge of the interview topic.

Practically, oral history is ‘a tape recorded interview in question and answer format ... on subjects of historical interest ... which is made accessible to other researchers.’ In practice, oral history usually results in the creation of taped interviews based on good research that records the experiences and living memories of individuals, many of whom are not ordinarily recognized as being part of history. Essentially, the practice of oral history produces records, or evidence, that enables us, when combined with other forms of evidence, to craft vital and compelling histories that can reveal a ‘truer’ past through people’s experiences and memories.

2.1 Memory & History

Oral history relies on memory, which is a highly individualised and personal construction of our past. No two people will remember the same historical event or place in the same way. attentions to the questions circulating around identity, narrative and historical memory – how people make sense of and remember their past, how they connect their

experience to what happens around them, how their past is remembered in the present and how they explain their lives in relation to the world they occupy.

Memory is lively, shaped as much by experiences in the past as by circumstances in the present. The relationship between memory and history then is often in tension.

But as much recent work has shown, individual oral histories and collective remembering, it has also exposed significant gaps in our documentary record, while providing a with compelling historical narratives that has exposed the willful silencing of aspects of our past.

Deeply embedded memories have enabled a broad shift in historical consciousness in this country. Individual and collective memory has the potential to unsettle place.

Official historical narratives have long sought to legitimize dispossession with a surfeit of white supremacist narratives across the continent.

The recent emphasis on stories and memories marks a shift, or perhaps a reaction against, the relics or sites based approach to cultural heritage that has tended to dominate both heritage and cultural studies. Personal and local histories may ultimately enable us to reclaim the past and generate innovative and relevant histories of people and the places in which they live

2.2 Oral History and social value.

It has been argued that social value is not about history, but more about the present and people's contemporary attachment to place. Social value relies on tradition, not history. In a sense oral history is a personal testimony that reveals the values, stories, memories and experiences of specific people and places. Oral history assists in understanding social values within living memory. This will help us gain an insight into the changes in people's values and the landscapes and places they consider important through their lives and experiences.

Recording the stories and memories that are passed from one generation to the next and assess how different values become part of social memory and history and be able to track the shifts in values between the present and the past.

Heritage professionals including architects, archaeologists and historians have and continue to prepare assessments that convincingly argue a place is significant for its historic, scientific or aesthetic values alone. In some instances where social significance is assessed as part of a heritage assessment there is often little evidence of broad discussion with communities, rather social values are determined on their behalf, or limited consultation is carried out.

2.3 Where to Start?

Guides & Policies

In recent years several cultural heritage policies have been prepared various cultural and academic concern, key pronouncements on the importance of oral histories have been issued by the department of Arts and Culture. The National Archives of South Africa Act (43 of 1996) as amended, points out the need to "collect non-public records with enduring value of national significance which cannot be more appropriately preserved by another institution, with due regard to the need to document aspects of the nation's experience neglected by archives repositories in the past".

Telling stories is a significant aspect of the culture of the people of South Africa. That is why the National Archives uses this method as a means of collecting and documenting the experiences and memories of South Africa's past that was deliberately neglected and distorted by the colonial and apartheid systems. They caused a deliberate omission of African knowledge, technologies, stories and philosophies.

During the year 2000 the then Department of Arts Culture Science and Technology now the Department of Arts and Culture was mandated by cabinet to conceptualise and spearhead a National Oral History Programme for South Africa.

The purpose of this programme was to supplement information already existing in our country's archival holdings by documenting distorted or neglected stories. In addition, The White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage provides for the promotion, protection, creation and funding of South Africa Arts, including written and oral literature, culture and heritage.

The programme started with an oral history pilot project whose theme was the 1956 Women's Anti-Pass March to the Union Buildings. National Archives staff conducted the interviews with about 10 to 15 ordinary and prominent women. The results are preserved at the National Archives of South Africa.

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act 43 of 1996 also determine that the National Archives "maintain a national automated archival retrieval system, in which all provincial archival services shall participate".

Consequently, the National Archives has developed and maintains a National Register of Oral Sources (Naros), amongst others, in order to fulfil this mandate. The results of this pilot project are already registered in Naros.

These pieces of legislation and programs point out some general guidelines that should inform the approach to be for the gathering and recording of all personal information collected since 2000; these guides include the following must comply with the following Collection Principles:

- You must collect personal information directly from the individual.
- You must make the individual aware:
 - That the information is being collected,
 - Of the purpose for which the information is being collected,
 - Of the intended recipients of the information.
- Whether they must supply their personal information because of a legal requirement or whether it is voluntary, and any consequences for them if the information is not provided,
- That they have a right to access and correct their personal information once collected.

You must take reasonable steps to ensure that personal information collected is: relevant to the purpose, not excessive, accurate, up to date and complete.

The National Department of Arts and Culture also notes that: “The Department of Arts and Culture together with other relevant government departments will not only be accountable for documenting the nation's neglected memory but will also endeavor to implement the following programmes:

- * training of collection practitioners
 - * developing a code of conduct for practitioners
 - * awareness campaigns
 - * reviewing and updating of the National Register of Oral Sources (Naros)
 - * the inclusion of Oral History in the school curricula and initiate pilot projects targeting schools
 - * promotion of new projects through Nasa outreach programmes
 - * support for existing projects
 - * publications and dissemination of Oral History knowledge
 - * networking with oral history practitioners in the rest of the world particularly in Africa.
- * Establishment of a National Oral History Association. The Oral History Association was established in 2004.

The national archives are the custodian of valuable Oral History projects. Our children and generation to come will appreciate the complete scope of history that truly reflects our diverse and rich culture.”

2.4 Getting Started

Oral history projects starts with an idea. If you are familiar with the practice of oral history then establishing a project will be straightforward enough, but even so there are some questions that you will need to ask yourself each time you embark on a new project. Key questions to answer include:

- a) How will your project contribute to the broader public's perception and knowledge of cultural heritage?
- b) Who will you interview? Why? How? Where?
- c) How will the people you are proposing to interview benefit from involvement in the project?
- d) Have you adequate funding, equipment, time and appropriate support to conduct the project?
- e) How will you promote the project?
- f) What will happen to the recordings and associated material you have created once the project is complete?

2.5 Background Research

Once you have answered such questions you will be able to develop your project plan and consider who you might approach for an interview. During this research phase you should spend time carrying out background research using books, historical and contemporary maps, newspapers, photographs, film and other sources. Local libraries with local studies collections can be an important source of information, as are historical societies, specialist libraries such as the Sinomlando Oral History Institute based in Pietermaritzburg, or government department libraries.

Preliminary research is vital because it enables you to develop an understanding of the period, place and themes. As well, it will enable you to develop interviews that will contribute to our historical understanding by adding vital new knowledge, not merely repeating well known facts. You will be able to pose specific questions, or ask follow up questions, that you may not have been able to without preparation. Preliminary research also enables you to demonstrate interest in your subject and the place, or historical circumstances around a person's life.

2.6 Mapping Memory

People's lives and memories move across the landscape in the course of remembering their past. We inhabit places, and we travel through a multitude over the course of our lives. We shape places we occupy and they in turn give shape to our lives. It is in the context of an individual's life that such landscapes and places acquired meaning, contributing to their personal narratives and sense of self. The best ways to map memory accurately is to interview people in the landscape, or at the places they remember and which are significant to them.

Are we asking questions about places that are significant to communities or groups of people? How does the information we collect contribute to our understanding of these places? By recording several individual oral histories focused on the same place/area overlays, commonalities and differences emerge. Some memories will cohere around specific places, whilst others will exist without collective or communal dimensions.

2.7 Who to interview?

Through your work you may have encountered a person, or a group of people, that have important stories to tell about a particular landscape, place, event, period or experience. It can happen that you have kept contact details of people or a group of people that may be willing to contribute to an oral history project. However, if you don't have anyone in mind there are many ways you can identify individuals within the community that may have knowledge of the subject you are interested in researching.

An advertisement or public announcement may be a good way of promoting your project; it can also be used to encourage people to contact you if they have stories, or information they wish to contribute. You should write a short article or letter explaining the project and submit it to the local paper. Some local radio stations are happy to promote oral

history projects and may mention the project as part of a community bulletin board or local history program.

Other alternatives include contacting local community groups, historical societies, community elders, local youth groups, churches and schools. When assembling a group of potential interviewees consider whether they have had actual experience of the subject. Strive to get a good mix of individuals, look for both males and females, and people of different ages and backgrounds so that you gather a range of different perspectives. At this stage you should record what information you have about each potential interviewee.

The information should include their name, address, telephone number, what information they are likely to have, and the name of the person that suggested you should approach them for an interview.

2.8 Preparatory work and arranging Interviews

a) Make initial conversation with potential interviewee and arranged a visit to discuss the project further it is a good idea to provide them with written confirmation. The letter should also include information about your project. You may think it appropriate to enclose the project brief, or excerpts from it. Include in your letter details regarding the interviewee's involvement, explaining such things as how many meetings are involved, what each would entail and the subjects you are interested in talking to them about.

b) Preliminary meetings are usually worthwhile; they enable you to meet the potential interviewee, gather some background information and also decide if their life memories are valuable in the context of your research. At a preliminary meeting you can also explain more about your project, tell the person how much time they will need to keep

free, what the interview will cover and what their involvement in the project will involve should they be willing to participate.

c) During your first meeting you should mention their involvement in reading and correcting a summary, log, or interview transcript, as well as how the material from the interview will be used. If you are intending to write a book, produce a radio program, a report, a planning document, or develop a brochure or interpretative signage, you will need to be clear on what the interviewee's role will be during the development of such outcomes. This is also the time to discuss the Information Agreement. It is a good idea to leave an Agreement with the person so they can consider how they would like their information to be managed before they record an interview.

Have a brief form that can be filled in by them that provides some basic information including:

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Full name | <input type="checkbox"/> If they know of, or are in contact with, |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Address | other individuals with |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Phone number | similar experiences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relationship to place | <input type="checkbox"/> whether they would be interested in |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Period of attachment | recording their |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Personal mementos, photos,
documents etc. that relate to the
place | memories as part of a DEC oral history
project in the future. |

2.9 Interviewing People

2.9.1 Preparing Questions

Background research also helps in the preparation of interview questions. As you are reading through various sources you can start preparing a list of subjects that can be grouped in logical order. A chronological approach is often best at this early stage and can be followed during an interview as people generally find it easier to remember their lives chronologically. You will need to spend some time thinking about how to ask questions and develop a mixture of question types. You should avoid suggesting answers.

Instead you should ask people to explain, or describe, their motives or feelings. There will of course be questions that require precise answers such as, 'where were you born?' In fact every interview should cover basic information including the date and place of birth, mothers, fathers and sibling's names and occupations. You will need to give careful consideration to how you will elicit descriptions, emotions, smells, sounds, feelings and experiences. Remember the best interviews are informative, engaging and spontaneous.

2.9.2 The Interview

For even the most experienced oral historians interviewing people can be stressful. There are always preliminary nerves to overcome and as an interviewer you should do your best to put the person you are interviewing at ease. Reassure them, perhaps by acknowledging it is usual to feel nervous when confronted by a tape recorder. Most people, however, quickly forget that the recorder is whirring away and that they are talking to a relative stranger.

First make sure you are both seated comfortably, in a quiet place free from distractions. If you are interviewing in the field, however, it is generally more demanding. Often you will be trying to manage a tape recorder, microphone, camera, note pad, pen and water bottle. In such circumstances it's a good idea to carry a shoulder bag with several compartments in which you can stow your equipment so that your hands are free to hold the microphone or tree branches as the case may be. Often when interviewing in the field you can find a comfortable shady spot to sit and record, or you may find that you can walk from place to place with the recorder off only switching it on when you reach the various remembered places.

Keep your questions short and clear, you should have already familiarised yourself with the different types of questions and the ways that they can be asked. Listen patiently, silently and carefully, and with your body language try and be as reassuring as you can. Where appropriate maintain good eye contact, smile, and nod, empathise and gently encourage with non-verbal communication. Avoid using standard verbal forms of acknowledgment such as 'mm's', "ums", "really!" and "I know!" Lastly, don't rush and don't jump from subject to subject.

It's a good idea to have a list of subject headings and a range of prompts or questions arranged under each. If possible, you should conduct the interview with paper and pen to hand so that you can write down any proper names, figures of speech and items that you are uncertain of so that you can clarify them after the interview.

2.10 Equipment

Below are a few tips that should ensure you are well prepared for an interview and you achieve the best technical standard possible.

1. Use a cassette tape-recorder with a recording meter. Experiment with your equipment before going to the interview. Have an extension cord, extra tapes and batteries on hand should the need arise.
2. Test your equipment when you arrive.
3. Remember that cassette tapes have a few seconds of 'lead time' and do not begin to record the moment you turn on the machine.
4. Use good quality, sixty-minute cassette tapes; longer tapes are more likely to break and shorter ones do not provide enough time on each side.
5. Don't store used or unused tapes in a hot, cold, humid, or dusty place. The back window or dashboard of an automobile, for example, is not the best place to carry tapes to or from an interview.
6. Record the date, place and names of the participants at the beginning of the interview. This should be done informally.
7. Do not record near air conditioners in the summer or heating vents in the winter. Check electrical circuits for possible interference.
8. When a cassette reaches the end of side one turns it over to side two without rewinding it.
9. If your recorder does not 'click off' automatically at the end of one side of the cassette, remember to watch the time and change the tape.
10. Punch out the 'tabs' on the cassette immediately after you finish with it, but not before. This ensures that what you have recorded cannot be erased.

13. If you are using an outside microphone, keep it on a small stand. Do not handle the microphone while recording.
14. If you are using an outside microphone, do not pass it back and forth.
15. Cassette tapes come in a case. Keep the case. It protects the tape from dust.
16. Never use the same tape for interviews with more than one person.
17. Never use the same tape for more than one session of an interview with the same person.
18. Label your tapes. Write the narrator's name and the date on each side of each tape. For example: 'Xolani Shembe, January 2, 2002, tape 1, side 2.' If one side of a cassette is blank, write 'blank' on that side.

2.11 After the Interview

After you turn off the tape recorder, don't rush off. Take the time to relax with and talk to the person you have just interviewed. For many people, particularly older people, recording an interview is a significant event. You should take the opportunity to reassure your interviewee, explain what you thought of the interview, how valuable their contribution will be to the project and how your understanding about the subject has been enhanced.

You can also use the time to ask them if they have any photographs, or other personal records, to answer any questions they may have about the project. You may also choose to check spellings, places and people's names.

It can be a good time to reiterate what you will do, such as provide them with a copy of the tape or tapes, return a copy of the transcript of the interview (if one is prepared) so

that they can review, correct or withdraw it. Always leave the interviewee with an address and telephone number where you can be contacted.

2.12 Processing Oral History Interviews

2.12.1 Transcribing

Both the processing and presentation will depend on the available resources, your time frame and intended outcome. Your project may warrant the preparation of transcripts. A transcript is a full written version of the recorded interview. They are invaluable for researchers because it is much quicker and simpler to scan several pages of printed text than listen to several hours of interview tapes, particularly if you are not sure the interview covers a topic you are interested in.

Typically it is the transcriber's job to type word-for-word what they hear on the tape so that the transcription is an accurate record of the interview. There are stylistic conventions that enable transcribers to more precisely capture the content of recorded interviews.

2.12.2 Interview Summaries

Often it is not necessary to prepare interview transcripts. If you have conducted the interviews yourself and are using them to inform your research and writing it may be sufficient to transcribe specific sections of the interview. Yet it is advisable to create some written record of the interview and the convention most frequently used is an interview summary, or log.

A summary should include the following basic information, the interview participants, where the interview was recorded, the date, the project the tape relates to and the interviewee's biographical details. The summary should also provide an overview of the interview including a basic outline of the topics covered in the order in which they were discussed and some commentary about the quality of the recording and the information it contains. If the interview is not entirely satisfactory you should say so.

2.12.3 Interview Logs

Interview logs are a great way to make interviews accessible. Logs are quite quick and easy to prepare and provide slightly more information in a different format to a summary. Conventions for preparing logs involve writing down the time, subjects and proper names mentioned during the course of the interview. Below is an example of a typical interview log set out in three columns with an area at the top of the each page for basic information about the interview participants, place of interview, date, and biographical details of the interviewee.:

Durban Sings Project.

TAPE 2008/05, TAPE 1/1, SIDE A

TIME min	Topic/Key words
00:00- 05:00	Intro & biography
05.00:12:00	Details of how they came to Clermont

2.13. Keep the Interviewee informed/involved

As your project progresses interviewees should be kept informed. They should have a clear understanding of each stage of the project so that they know what to expect. This is an essential part of good project planning and management. Your discussions and any written documentation you provide regarding your project should have clearly stated what they will receive, (ie copies of the interview on tape, summary, log or transcript) what is required of them and the time they will need to for each phase of the project. If summaries, logs or transcripts are prepared you should always return them to your interviewees for verification and approval. If possible it is best to undertake this process in person.

2.14 Telling Other People

2.14.1 Ways to Present Oral History

Oral history can be used in a range of ways. Your project plan should have clearly defined your subject, themes, outcomes and audience. You may have started your research so as to identify places of cultural importance, or to record the memories of a group of individuals and uncover the lived history of a specific place. Whatever questions you were seeking answers to, the interview questions, summaries, logs, or transcripts, should not be seen as the only outcome of your project.

Your project plan should include other realistic and achievable outcomes that will enable the oral evidence you have gathered to reach a broader audience. Excerpts from the interviews, combined with any photographs, maps or personal items could be used for a Newspaper or magazine article, or a display in a local library. Perhaps you have expertise in a particular area, or you can team up so together you can produce a brochure, interpretative signage, publication, audio walking guide, a radio or television program, website, CD Rom, or a short documentary or video. Whatever the planned outcome is you will also need to give careful consideration to how you will make history from the interviews you have collected.

2.14.2 Making History from Life Stories

In order to make history from the recorded interviews you have collected they will need to be analysed and interpreted. You will need to relate the memories people have shared with you to the wider the social, political and economic context. Like other forms of evidence you will need to analyse, assess and ultimately shape the oral information or memories into history. You may choose to record a number of interviews use their life story to craft a narrative which relates their life to broader historical shaping forces. Some people's life stories provide a really powerful lens through which the experience of a particular group can be projected.

Oral histories may also be grouped together as a collection of stories that enable a range of different voices to be related to the wider historical context

Another method is to analyse the oral evidence you have and incorporate it into a broader historical argument. Such an approach will require the evidence included in each interview be compared and contrasted, and generally means that far less of each interview is likely to be included in the final piece of writing. It is not uncommon to find when you come to analyse your interviews and weave them into a logical historical argument that there are omissions or gaps in your research and questions emerge that you hadn't considered previously.

Even without reference to the broader historical context and the things that might have influenced people's lives, the collection of interviews you have will reveal a variety of different experiences, stories and memories of the same landscape, place or event. If you choose to present the interviews as a collection of individual life and landscape stories you should explain that is how the interviews appear in your publication, report or other outcome.

2.14.3 Writing up a report

The presentation of any oral evidence will require some form of editing. The extent to which you edit will be dictated largely by the form you choose. If you choose to use the experience of an individual to talk about the broader historical context you will obviously be using a significant proportion of their oral evidence along side other forms of evidence. If, however, you intend to present the interviews as a collection of stories, you may, depending on the number of people you have interviewed, decide to dedicate a certain amount of air time, in the case of film or broadcast, or page space to each person in the case of a book. Obviously if you use the interviews as a body of evidence you will ultimately present less of each interview, though the views or experiences of some people may be used as examples to illustrate specific points.

Is it necessary to change the wording, grammar, and syntax? Will you involve the people you have interviewed in the process? Given one of the reasons we collect oral evidence is to gain some insight into how living people experience and remember the past, it is important to preserve the individual voices of the people you have interviewed.

2.14.5 Tips on Storing and caring for data sets

If during the course of your work you have recorded interviews with people and you have retained copies of the tapes it is important to know how best to care for them. For long term storage of audio and visual media the best practice standards are:

- 18 degrees Celsius, plus or minus 2 degrees
- 40% relative humidity plus or minus 5%
- filtered air to exclude dust or other particles
- well ventilated storage areas
- Store tapes in non-magnetic, archival quality containers.

11 Concluding comments