ORAL HISTORY: RESEARCH IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT*

Philippe Denis[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

Oral history as a technique for historical documentation was initiated in the North. It has been recognised as an academic discipline in the United States, England, Germany, Spain and Canada for more than half a century. But it is as relevant in developing countries, as was shown by the number of delegates from the South at the thirteenth conference of the International Oral History Society in Rome in June 2004. Oral history has been practised in South Africa since the late 1970s. With the advent of democracy, however, new categories of oral history practitioners, new types of projects and new methodologies appeared. My purpose here is to assess and to comment upon these practices and methodologies. To what extent do they differ from those in use in the rest of the world? Is there a (South) African way of doing oral history?

This article is based on the experience of the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa, a research and development centre located within the School of Religion and Theology of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Established in 1994 this centre runs several oral history projects, mostly in KwaZulu-Natal.[2] It also offers oral history modules to university students, archivists, heritage officers, high school teachers and church personnel. On the basis of this teaching experience, the Sinomlando Centre is writing a manual and a code of ethics for oral history practitioners, which will hopefully be ready for publication in 2005.

What is presented here is work in progress. Research on the theory and practice of oral history in Africa is still at an early state. I presented preliminary reflections on this topic in an article entitled "Oral history in a wounded country", that has been published in a collection of essays in 2003.[3] In the same volume the African

---

* Revised version of a paper read at the first national oral history conference in Pretoria, 25-28 October 2004.

1 Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

2 For a presentation of the Sinomlando Centre see www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/sinomlando.

3 P Denis, "Oral history in a wounded country", in Jonathan Draper (ed.), **Orality, literacy and colonialism in Southern Africa** (Semeia Studies, 46, Atlanta, 2003), pp. 205-16.

historian and anthropologist, Terence Ranger, discusses some of the points raised in my article.[4] I shall use this opportunity to respond to Terence Ranger.

2. ANTECEDENTS OF ORAL HISTORY IN AFRICA

Whether in Africa or elsewhere in the world, oral history is not as new as it might seem. Other memory practices anticipated and, in many ways, laid the foundation for the work of oral historians. Oral tradition is one of these. Unlike oral history testimonies, oral traditions are generated *in situ* for cultural, social or political purposes. They do not claim to have an academic purpose. Yet they contribute in a significant way to the knowledge of the past, especially in societies with little or no access to the written medium.

Oral traditions are passed on by word of mouth, and their lifespan exceeds that of their initiators. The expression 'oral tradition' applies both to a process and to a product. The products are oral messages based on earlier oral messages, reaching back at least a generation. The process is the transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time until the message disappears.[5]

Also relevant for our purpose is the practice of story-telling. Story-telling is a well-known African form of socialisation that bridges the gap between young and old. As literary scholar Isabel Hofmeyr points out that gender shapes story-telling practices. Men and women do not tell stories in the same way, or to the same audience. Men speak in public and produce formal historical narratives. Women, usually elderly women, tell stories to other women and to children and even men are not excluded from their audience. They tell stories which do not refer directly to the past. As Hofmeyr notes, a grandmother sitting beside the fire and telling stories to her grandchildren is one of the most enduring images in Southern African oral literary studies.[6]

4 T Ranger, "Commentary", in Draper, pp. 229-48.
5 J Vansina, **Oral tradition as history** (London 1985), p. 13.
6 I Hofmeyr, "We spend our years as a tale that is told. Oral history narrative in a South African chiefdom (Johannesburg, 1994).

3. ORAL HISTORY AND CULTURE

3.1 The social meaning of the interview

All interviews, whether in the North or in the South, have a cultural dimension. Oral history practitioners need to be aware of the cultural dynamics at work in the interview situation. On does not conduct an oral history project in a middle-class suburb of England in the way one would do in rural Zuzuland.

In developed countries, interviews are a well-defined and socially acceptable mode of communication. Job seekers know that an interview is a prerequisite for employment. Interviews regularly feature in television programmes and people are used to responding to polls and questionnaires. While in the North, there is nothing unusual about being interviewed, in Africa, by contrast, interviews are rare events. Indigenous people are disconcerted when they are subjected to formal interviews. This is why they tend to revert to traditional modes of communication.

3.2 Seniority and respect

In an African context, custom dictates how to address senior people. Seniority relates to age but also to gender, social rank and education. Strict conventions, described in isiZulu as 'respect' (ukuhlonipha), regulate the relationships between the ordinary and the senior people. Priests and teachers, for instance, are seen as senior people even if they are young. A woman owes respect to her husband, but, if she has raised her children, and especially if she has been widowed, she can expect to be treated with respect by younger women, her daughters-in-law in particular. Oral history practitioners who do not take these subtle hierarchies into account will be perceived as rude and face rejection.

In traditional African societies a long and complicated process regulates the access to senior people. One does not approach a chief or a headman without intermediaries. All transactions require middlemen who prepare the ground for the meeting with the leaders.

Junior people are expected not to address senior people directly and they have to use the indirect speech and the plural form. It is inappropriate to call a senior person, especially in the case of a man, by his name. Paraphrases such as 'the father of' are deemed more suitable.

Likewise, a young person may not look an elder person in the eyes. The same applies to women in their behaviour towards men. Any form of behaviour that could be construed as showing pride is to be avoided.

Oral history practitioners have to conform to the local norms of communication when planning and conducting interviews. As Slim and Thompson note, these norms relate to turn-taking, the order of topics for discussion, or the various rituals attached to story-telling:

> "In some societies, individual interviews are considered dangerously intimate encounters. In others, the recounting of group history can be a sacred ritual and certain people must be consulted before others. Sometimes a number of clearly prescribed topics should be used to start proceedings, while other topics may be taboo, or should not be introduced until a particular level of intimacy and trust has been achieved."[7]

Topics such as sexuality, marriage or divorce are indeed taboo in traditional African societies. Interviewers may only refer to them indirectly. Both parties must pretend that they do not know what the conversation is about. When the interviewers speak, it will be after a lengthy delay. They must be sure that their interviewees will not put themselves, their families and their communities at risk in what they say.

Phumzile Mwandla, the head of the oral history department at the KwaZulu-Natal Provincial Archives in a recent paper illustrates the importance of overcoming suspicion before being able to gain access to an interviewee. She and one of her colleagues were due to interview a headman (induna) at KwaCeza in the Nongoma area on matters related to the Zulu culture. The first time they went to his house the man would not open his gate. They had to talk over the fence for a long period of time without entering the house. He wanted to know who the interviewers were, where they came from and who had sent them. When they came back for a second visit, he gave them a warm welcome and agreed that the interview could take place in his house.[8]

The culture of respect is very strong in the rural areas. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that it is no longer adhered to in the urban areas despite the impact of modernity on them. Age and gender discriminations persist everywhere.

---

7 H Slim and P Thompson, **Listening for a change. Oral testimony and development** (London 1993), p.62.

8 P Mwandla, "Experiences of conducting oral history with the ordinary people of KwaZulu-Natal, National oral history conference, Pretoria 25-28 October 2004, unpublished paper.

The interviewers who ignore these social codes are condemned to failure, and even if they succeed in securing an appointment, the content of the interview will be poor. Respecting the culture of the interviewee is a prerequisite for a successful interview.

3.3 The communal dimension of the interview

In Africa, individual interviews make little sense. All interviews, even those that are conducted on a one-to-one basis, have a communal dimension. People do not stand alone. The other members of the community want to be involved. They either insist on being present during the interview, or they ask to be consulted before it takes place.

Women are particularly reluctant to speak on their own behalf, because they are brought up in the belief that they are not allowed to speak in public. Women avoid the first person and rarely mention their personal accomplishments. They seldom place themselves at the center of public events, they downplay their own activities and, in their reminiscences, they emphasise the role of other family members. In pre-colonial Southern Africa, women's story-telling was a marginalized and patronised craft, relegated to the distinctly lesser sphere of a separate women's world. In many ways the 'institutionalised silencing'[9] which characterized women's subordination in former times, continues to affect female story-telling in contemporary South Africa.

If she is married, a woman is expected to ask permission from her husband before agreeing to be interviewed. If, like most women involved in the Sinomlando Memory Box Programme, she is not married, she does not feel free to talk until senior embers of the family such as an aunt, an uncle or a brother has been informed of the interview and has given her permission to take part in it. Many interviews have to be postponed several times for this reason. At first we did not understand why the person we approached - HIV-positive mothers or grandmothers caring for AIDS orphans - were so reluctant to share their memories. Experience has shown that thorough knowledge of the family dynamics is essential for the success of the intervention.

Similar resistance is observed in church groups. Unless they are well educated, lay ministers, members of women's organisations and church volunteers are reluctant to speak about church matters without the pastor's explicit permission. Social control is usually stricter in African indigenous churches (AICs) than in 'mainline'

9 Hofmeyr, p. 25.

churches. A minister of a local AIC congregation would not agree to speak to a stranger without first referring the matter to his bishop or superintendent.

Mwandla confirms this point of view. Women, she explains, "must be seen but not heard". Often they are the most knowledgeable people in the community but custom restricts their ability to speak:

> "(When conducting interviews) at Highflats, we ended up with a group interview because the elderly woman we had been referred to had told us that out of respect male representatives would have to be present during the interview so that they could verify that she did not say anything against the community. She told us that she could answer all our questions (about Zulu culture) but that she was not allowed to talk outside of the presence of male monitors."[10]

The same happens at the family level. A mother, in another case, could not be interviewed without the consent of her sons. A family meeting had to be held first:

> "We had this experience with a lady from Umzumbe. Before we could talk to her personally, her sons had to meet and decide whether they would allow us to talk to their mother. Fortunately for us they gave permission. But they insisted that they would like to have family members present during the interview session to oversee the process and ensure that the old woman was not intimidated by our questions."[11]

3.4 The assertiveness of African women

Is it true that in Africa the idea of individual interviews makes little sense? In his 'commentary' Terence Ranger claims that, in Zimbabwe at least, women are not reluctant to tell their stories on their own:

> "I have worked with third-year history students from the University of Zimbabwe both in researching the black peasant experience of Makoni district in eastern Zimbabwe and more recently in exploring the urban experiences in the Bulawayo townships. The students found no difficulty in interviewing women on their own - whether the researcher was male or female - nor in recording their long personal narratives. These women were also quite ready to talk about their personal accomplishments."[12]

---

10 Mwandla. passim.
11 **Ibid**.
12 Ranger, p. 231.

Our experience of interviewing women in KwaZulu-Natal is, in fact, similar. Some of the women we have interviewed - manyano leaders, victims of political violence or caregivers of AIDS orphans - are very assertive. Once granted permission to give their testimony, they talk. Sometimes they talk for a long time, with pride and passion. They always thank the interviewers for giving them the opportunity to tell their stories.

But Ranger misses the point. Most black women, even those who exercise responsibilities in their community or in their church, do not speak spontaneously. They only confide their experience to the people whom they trust. For an interview to be rich and substantial, particularly when it comes to gender issues, a relationship of trust needs to be established between the interviewer and the interviewee.

This is where the communal dimension of the interview plays a role. In some instances a woman may be interviewed individually. But this does not mean that the community is absent. The intrusion of a researcher, particularly if he or she is smartly dressed and drives a car, is a social event. It will be commented on, sometimes for days, by the neighbours and the relatives of the interviewee. If, for some reason, the motives of the interviewer seem suspicious in the community, all doors will be closed. The interviewee will be unavailable. The interviewer will wonder why the person they want to interview is always busy, or sick, or looking for a job. In Africa an interview, even if it is conducted on an individual basis, involves the whole community.

4. ORAL HISTORY AND TRAUMA

4.1 Is South Africa's history unique?

In a previous paper I made the point that, in South Africa, all individual stories are influenced by the 'grand narrative' of colonialism and apartheid, even those that apparently have nothing to do with it. This is probably why the stories of the people we interview have an intensity, an emotional quality, a sense of tragedy which is not often found elsewhere. South Africa is a 'wounded country'.

All stories are meaningful, whether they come from the North or from the South, from privileged sectors of society or from rejected classes. But in a divided country such as South Africa oral history projects have to pay particular attention to trauma and healing. These aspects are usually under-emphasised in oral history projects conceived and carried out in countries free from war and extreme poverty.

In the United States, for example, the impetus for doing oral history is said to be "curiosity and a desire to see one's own past preserved". In my paper I quoted the pamphlet on community history projects published by the American Oral History Association.[13] "Community history projects", the pamphlet says, "significantly expand community members' understanding of their identity, their history and their connection with other communities. If an oral history component of a community history project is carefully planned and well researched, it can produce a more accurate picture of the complexity and diversity of a community's heritage and can potentially contribute to a broader understanding of American history and culture."

I wonder if this language could be used in an oral history manual for South Africa. In a wounded country, one does not collect stories merely to satisfy one's curiosity. In a further paragraph, the authors of the pamphlet note that community history projects contribute to "a broader understanding of American history and culture". In South Africa, nobody would assume that there is a national culture to the broader understanding of which oral history projects would contribute. This culture may exist in some places but it is extremely fragile. In no way it can be taken for granted.

In his 'commentary', Terence Ranger argues that "it is not helpful to the oral historian to lay so much emphasis on the abnormality of South Africa":

> "Whatever view one takes on the history of the United States or Britain, is it really possible to maintain that South Africa's history has been more traumatic than that of Nazi Germany or of Soviet Russia, to cite two examples where there has recently been much discussion of memory and forgetting? [...] And even in Africa can one seriously maintain that South Africa's memories are more agonising than those of the Southern Sudan, or of the Congo, or of Rwanda? In Rwanda, indeed, the scale of calamity almost overwhelms memory and its capacity to heal."[14]

I note Ranger's critique. To a degree, I sympathise with it. I would hate to engage in the sordid task of classifying the atrocities committed in the past according to their degree of horror. Which one should come first - the millions of people whose lives were ruined because of the slave trade? The extermination of the Indian people in the conquest of America? The Holocaust? The genocide in Cambodia? The genocide in Rwanda? Then comes apartheid. Does apartheid need to qualify as a crime against humanity to be horrifying? I do not want to enter into this debate.

---

13 L Mercier and N Buckendorf, **Using oral history in community projects** (Pamphlet series/Oral History Association # 4), 1992.

14 Ranger, p. 230.

In my paper I made it clear that South Africa does not have the monopoly of trauma. The list of nations, ethnic groups and cultural minorities who suffer from oppression and marginalisation is endless. As far as oral history is concerned, what matters is that colonialism and apartheid have left an indelible mark on South African society. Whether we are black, white, Indian or coloured, our lives bear the mark of apartheid. This is true even for people, like myself, who were not born on South African soil.

Why harp on apartheid? Should we not rather look ahead and face the challenges of the new South Africa? This is probably where I differ most from people like Ranger who are at pains to explain that South Africa is not, and probably never was, an 'abnormal' country. I contend that all the evils of our times can be attributed, at least partly, to the legacy of apartheid. One can argue, for instance, that the higher prevalence of AIDS in Southern Africa is a consequence of the disruption of family life brought about by migrant labour and forced removals. Domestic violence and sexual abuse, among the worst plagues of modern-day South Africa, are the expressions of a crisis of masculinity, perhaps not produced by entrenched racial domination, but at least deepened and perpetuated by it. The long association of the police, the army and the judicial system with an unjust regime in wide sectors of the population provoked an almost instinctive disregard for the law. Under apartheid, a semblance of order reigned in the country. Since its demise, the level of crime has risen considerably. This is typical of countries emerging, like Russia, from decades of authoritarianism and dictatorship.

4.2 Emotions and trauma

In a recent paper, Sean Field, who has spent many years studying violence-stricken communities in Cape Town, argues that "oral histories are always emotional histories".[15] In the context of violence, he further explains, the expressed and unexpressed feelings of interviewees (and interviewer) are persistently present in different, sometimes disruptive manifestations.

Our experience as oral history practitioners in KwaZulu-Natal is similar. When we conduct interviews the likelihood of an upsurge of emotions - anger, sadness, fear, guilt - is very great. Of course, we do not deal with trauma narratives all the time. Many interviews are free from trauma. But traumatic situations are less rare than one would think. We often have to deal with emotions, sometimes strong emotions. This happens in all societies which have undergone a massive abuse of human

[15] S Field, "Interviewing in a culture of violence. Moving memories from Windermere to the Cape Flats", in KL Rogers and S Leydesdorff, **Trauma: Life stories of survivors** (New Brunswick and London, 2004), p. 61.

rights. Oral history practitioners need to know how to deal with emotional situations and be prepared to deal with them. Here again, I agree with Sean Field when he says that "the interviewer needs to be acutely sensitive to the emotional, transferential and power dynamics of the interviewer/interviewee relationship".[16]

Why is oral history so important at this particular stage of the history of South Africa? It is because the sharing of memories has the potential to affirm and consolidate identities, individual as well as collective, which were repressed in the past. Any oral history project, however small, can be an instrument of nation-building. For this to happen, oral history practitioners need proper training. An insensitive interviewer can do more harm than good. If somebody tells a painful story, the murder of a son during the times of political violence, for instance, or a situation of gender oppression, the attitude of the interviewer plays a crucial role in the outcome of the interview. By nodding or by asking follow-up questions, good interviewers encourage the interviewees to continue their story. They show that they are listening and that the story that they are hearing, painful as it is, is important to them. By the simple fact of being present, they validate the experience of the narrator.

Even when told by people who have suffered trauma, the stories do not necessarily convey an experience of pain and suffering. Kim Lacy Rogers, who interviewed black civil rights activists in the American South, notes that while some stories fall into the category of trauma narratives, others can be described as "narratives of redemption".[17] They show how their authors managed, despite all odds, to move beyond exploitation and trauma. Ranger makes a similar point. The people of northern Matelebeland, he says, "have their own mechanisms of healing and did not need us to help them do to it".[18]

4.3 What is an oral historian?

"What we were used for", Ranger continues, "other than as listeners, was as reporters, expected to write the narratives of these people into the national records as a way of proclaiming their due rights as citizens."[19] I would agree with this statement as long as it is not understood in a restrictive way. It is not because people who have shown resilience and are proud of their accomplishments, have nothing to gain, at a personal level, from an interview. Many people, especially

16 **Ibid**.
17 KL Rogers, "Trauma redeemed: the narrative construction of social violence", in EM McMahan and KL Rogers, **Interactive oral history interviewing**, (Hillsdale, New Jersey and Hove, UK, 1994), pp. 31-46.
18 Ranger, p. 233.
19 **Ibid**.

among the poor. do not know that their stories are worth recounting. The act of soliciting an interview is never insignificant. A good interview is one which makes a difference in the lives of both role-players: in that of the interviewees because it may be the first time they tell their stories and in that of the interviewers because they feel humbled and enriched after listening to these stories.

Oral history practitioners need listening skills. They are sometimes confronted by emotional situations which require self-control, sensitivity and openness of heart. The extent to which they have dealt with their own emotions will affect their responses. But what is an oral historian? Do I mean that to do a good job, an oral history practitioner needs to be a trained counsellor?

On this issue, I would again like to quote Ranger. In his "commentary", he interprets my paper as saying that an oral historian should be a "thaumaturge". He outlines his own positions as follows: "I see the oral historian not as an active healer and certainly not as an agent of conscientization. The oral historian is above all a listener, an audience."[20]

My response is that an oral historian does not have to choose between being a healer and being a listener. He is not, to be sure, a professional healer. If the interviewee displays signs of distress, it is the duty of the interviewer to refer him to health professionals. This is what, at the Sinomlando Centre, we describe as 'signposting'. The role of an oral historian is to facilitate a conversation about the past. He is not a priest, he is not a psychiatrist and he is not a social worker.

Having said this, I do not see how a good interview would not have a healing effect. The simple fact of being listened to - and we know how difficult it is to listen effectively - can give people who have suffered discrimination and oppression as sense of self-esteem and of identity that will orientate their lives positively.

5. THE ETHICS OF ORAL HISTORY

Three ethical principles should guide oral historians in South Africa:

- Informed consent and transparency;
- respect for the interviewee;
- benefit to the community.

[20] **Ibid**.

These three ethical principles are not specific to South Africa. They feature in codes of ethics for oral history practitioners all over the world. I contend, however, that, given the history of this country, they are especially relevant.

5.1 Informed consent and transparency

Despite the culture of ubuntu, the relationships between people, families and local groups are often loaded with mistrust and suspicion in communities torn with violence and conflict. A neighbour or even a family member always represents a potential risk. When strangers, whether social activists or researchers, request an interview from a community member, they should not be surprised to encounter resistance. They must first prove that they are trustworthy.

To alleviate all fears the interviewers must ensure that the interviewees give informed consent, normally by way of a release form. The purpose of the interview and its projected outcome must be made perfectly clear to the interviewee. Sometimes the request for an interview must be re-explained to ensure that the interviewees fully understand its implications. As far as possible the members of the group - family members, colleagues, friends and other parishioners - should also be included in the process.

5.2 Respect

In the first part of this article I emphasised the importance of respect in African society. Interviewers should understand and follow the codes of communication governing the communities to which they want to be introduced. They should not do so for the sake of good strategy: "Unless I follow their codes, they will refuse to be interviewed." Oral history practitioners should, from conviction and as a moral duty, follow the rules of respect in use in the community.

This is particularly important when they face emotional situations. The retrieval of information should never be an absolute priority. If the interviewers realise that the person they are interviewing is overcome by emotions and in great distress, it is their responsibility to give the interviewee time to rest and, if need be, to stop the interview altogether. Interviewees retain the right to withdraw from an interview at all times.

5.3 Benefit to the community

We all know of instances of over-researched communities. In some areas the people are tired of researchers, journalists and politicians who pump information

from them without giving anything in return. They multiply their promises in order to gain access to the community but never keep any of them. Once they have what they want, they are never to be seen again.

Individual people or groups of community members who grant an interview should always derive some benefit from it. This matter is difficult and controversial. I personally would not recommend that the interviewees be remunerated as this creates confusion and raises false expectations. Under normal circumstances one does not derive financial benefit from a story.

But other forms of benefits may be considered. Minimally, once the interview has been transcribed and edited, feedback should be given to the interviewee and the handing over of a copy of the tape and of the transcript to the interviewees should be the normal practice. They will then have access to their own stories, for it is they and not the researchers who own the stories. They will be able to share them with their children, their relatives and their friends. Having the possibility to share one's story with others is extremely affirming. For people whose rights have been denied, sometimes for long periods of time, such a return will contribute to a renewed sense of self-esteem.

Other forms of feedback can be envisaged, such as the publication of a book, an exhibition or the organisation of a meeting during which the achievements of the interviewees will be recognised and celebrated. The local people are probably those who best know how to conclude the oral history project in which they have taken part.

6. CONCLUSION

Oral history is practised all over the world. In a country like South Africa, with a long history of oppression and discrimination, this form of social intervention is particularly relevant. Interviewers need to take into account the norms of communication and the rules of respect in use in the community to which they want to be introduced. They should be culturally sensitive not only as a way of gaining better access to information but because the people they interview deserve respect and recognition. Many interviews are emotion laden. South Africans have joyful but also painful memories to share. This is why some interview situations are difficult to handle and why the appropriate training is important. If done well, oral history has a significant role to play in nation-building.