

EXPANDING THE NATURE OF ORAL HISTORY: EXAMPLES FROM THE NAMOHA BATTLE, QWA-QWA, 1950

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1. INTRODUCTION

Every family and every place has a history of its own, one that can contribute detailed knowledge to the study of wider historical themes. Every individual, in one way or the other, plays or has played a part in moulding a society. Therefore, one cannot fully understand what really happened during a particular event if those people who witnessed that event and other related milestones are ignored. Oral history methodology provides the necessary tools to record the eyewitness accounts of a particular occurrence. This article looks closely at the nature of oral history, highlighting its definition, importance and how it relates to other forms of historical inquiry. Its value in the writing of history and what distinguishes it from other forms of historical enquiry are also dealt with. This article argues that another way of finding out about the past is to simply talk to people, collecting memories and experiences of their own lives, of the people known to them and of the events they witnessed or in which they participated.

2. THE NATURE OF ORAL HISTORY

Oral history is personal accounts of an individual who witnessed and was affected or played a part in an event that took place in the past. This means that oral information can be about individuals' life stories or about their participation in, and experience of, an historical episode. Oral history enables even ordinary people to make contributions to history by giving them an opportunity to share their memories and experiences of past occurrences and processes. Harry Mothibi, a resident of Mabilela Village in Qwa-Qwa, who took part in the 1950 Namoha Battle,² had this to say in sharing his memories and experiences of the battle:

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¹ B Allen and WL Montell, *From memory to history: Using oral sources in local historical research* (Nashville, 1982), p. 23.

² L Barnard, J-A Stemmet and S Semela, "The battle of Namoha, Qwa-qwa (1950): An oral history perspective", *Journal for Contemporary History*, Vol. 30, No. 3, December 2005.

"I was very much concerned about the government's decision to cull our cattle. I had cattle myself and was very possessive about them. As a result I joined the group that opposed this decision. We could not understand this decision, as our Paramount Chief, Charles Mopeli, had nothing to do with this decision. We felt that our monarchy and our rights had been undermined and as a nation we had to do something to protect ourselves and the institution. We tried everything possible to make the government aware of our concerns, but to no avail. At one of our gatherings the police came and wanted to disperse us. We refused to disperse and then there was confrontation that led to the loss of lives. After the first shot had been fired, police horses galloped into the gathering and the police began shooting randomly at us. I was among the first to be hit by a bullet. It hit me on the thigh and I fell down. As I fell down, I thought this was the end of my life. To my amazement, as I was lying down, I did not feel much pain, but I could not move and lay there until the shooting stopped. After the shooting, my friend, Buthelezi, came and carried me on horseback to my house. On arrival at home, I was feeling a terrible pain but was not prepared to go to the hospital. It was for the first time in my life that I saw and felt the brutality of the white people of that time towards black people. We did not expect such a brutal reaction from the police, considering that we were not armed nor provocative in any way. We posed no threat to anybody."³

This was the experience of Harry Mothibi after his involvement in the Namoha Battle in 1950. It is obvious from this account that the Basotho's opposition to the culling of their cattle ended in a disaster. Memories such as these interest many people, though they are hardly the stuff of which history has traditionally been made. Oral history is based on the use of such personal reminiscences as a source on which to build history either as an alternative or as a complement to the documents on which historians normally rely.⁴

Through memories like those of Mothibi, groups of people who were previously considered unimportant to merit any attention since they were viewed as too common, are being widely written and read about. Such persons were seen as not feasible subjects for historical studies since they rarely left behind, if at all, the kind of documentation on which historians depend. Oral history offers a singular opportunity to capture and preserve such perspectives as source material.⁵

³ **Personal collection**, tape-recording of interview with Mr Harry Mothibi, an ordinary Mosotho from Mabilela Village, 21 March 2002.

⁴ MS Semela, *The Namoha Battle, Qwa-Qwa (1950): A case study on the significance of oral history*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, May 2005, University of the Free State, p. 2.

⁵ **Ibid.**, p. 3.

It is generally assumed that historical knowledge is based on documents and relics that survived the past such as books, letters and diaries, deeds and wills, church registers, and records of births, deaths, marriages and tax, houses, tools, gravestones, and other material artifacts.⁶ In many cases these documents and artifacts can provide as much information about the people who created them, as can oral traditions. Although the majority of oral history studies have concentrated on the ordinary persons, particularly the working classes and the underprivileged,⁷ it is important to note that other groups of people, such as leaders, can also be part of oral history.

Oral history is based on direct collection, usually electronically, by means of, for example, a tape recorder, of someone's experiences (potentially of anyone's and everyone's experiences). These are then used like any other historical sources to recover a picture of the past, and of how and why things happened as they did. It is thus, a bona fide form of historical research. It opens up the areas of human experience that conventional methods do not necessarily touch.⁸ Informants provide personal experiences, memories of, and feelings about, an event, which are usually not available in history records, or which would have disappeared. Thus, by working with living informants, oral history researchers help create lasting documents of the subject under study.⁹ The method used for gathering such recollections (the collecting of individuals' *spoken memories* of their lives, of people they have known, and events they have witnessed or in which they participated) is oral history.¹⁰ As such oral history is based on contemporary eyewitness accounts and perspectives of occurrences and situations. Unlike documentary research, oral history brings the researcher into direct contact with the people who have first-hand information.¹¹

One of the primary values of oral testimony is its usefulness in reconstructing the fabric of daily life and in documenting the smaller details of family and community survival, for which written evidence is often scarce. Oral history is spoken history, subject to all the biases and vagaries inherent in human recall. Yet it is not substantially different from other historical sources. Oscar Handlin claims that "its data must be subjected to the same tests of evidence as other sources and examined along with other contemporary sources for corroboration and authentication".¹²

⁶ G Lewis, "The ultimate oral history", **Library Journal**, Vol. 126, No. 14, 14 September 2001, p. 29.

⁷ S Oosthuizen, "History of personal experience", **Adults learning**, Vol. 9, No. 4, 20 December 1997, p. 58.

⁸ Allen and Montell, p. 23.

⁹ Semela, p. 4.

¹⁰ D Ritchie, **Doing oral history**, (New York, 1995), p. 1.

¹¹ Semela, p. 4.

¹² O Handlin, **Truth in history** (London, 1979), p. 127.

This is true because, for it to be accepted as reliable, truthful and authentic, it has to be exposed to all the tests that are used to evaluate any historical sources.

Oral history research is more than simply tape-recording a conversation. It takes up much time and energy. To solidify the work in an oral history project, considerable effort has to be made before interviewers meet their interviewees. If the purpose of such a project is to complement or supplement a documentary record, the researcher, first, needs to be aware of what information is needed from the oral sources. Thus written sources covering the topic need to be consulted to determine the gaps and to provide the interviewer with the necessary information when formulating interview questions. Charles Morrissey rightly states: "The greater the amount of pre-interview preparation that takes place, the more useful the eventual oral testimony will prove to be."¹³

John Tosh points out that "conventional background research using documentary sources is necessary and needs to be undertaken first by any researcher".¹⁴ Certainly, this would enable an oral history researcher to recreate the historical, social, political, economic and cultural contexts necessary for interpretation of oral history. Such preparation would encourage historians to make wider use of oral testimony, relying as it does, on the supporting evidence found in other records.¹⁵ In addition to establishing meaningful contexts for interpreting oral history, Tosh explains that "the researcher must also deal with the problem that memory is fallible".¹⁶ This is another reason why background research is important because the researcher would be in a position to assist the informant to recall more experiences with greater accuracy. Furthermore, the oral history researcher ought to cross-check oral information with the written, validating the one or the other.¹⁷ Background research is indeed necessary as it also aids the oral historian in formulating relevant questions.

Historians can create a document of great value to their generation and to posterity through oral history. One of the virtues of oral history, as pointed out by James E Fogerty, is that "it is useful for dealing with the history of ordinary people and groups, or events, lifestyles and movements, that did not leave written records".¹⁸ The reasons for not leaving any written record could have been either because of illiteracy, or of being excluded from the written history due to economic, social, or political circumstances. It could, for others, have been because writing about their

¹³ C Morrissey, "Oral history reliability is under question", *Library Journal*, Vol. 105, No. 12, 15 June 1980, p. 56.

¹⁴ J Tosh, *The pursuit of history* (London, 1984), p. 185.

¹⁵ Semela, p. 5.

¹⁶ Tosh, p. 185.

¹⁷ Ritchie, p. 19.

¹⁸ JE Fogerty, "Filling in the gaps: oral history in the archives", *American Archivist*, Vol. 46, No. 2, Spring 1983, p. 156.

life experiences was just not something many ordinary people did, while others might have lacked the time or confidence or skills to write.¹⁹

The fact is that information is lost every day as people die, companies throw away records, and government files are destroyed. Oral history can facilitate reconstructing and preserving some of the lost historical information. However, oral history is not a substitute for written records. As Fogerty puts it, "it complements them and is most useful when written records are available".²⁰ Written and oral history are, in fact, not at all in competition with each other. They heavily rely on each other. They have common as well as dissimilar characteristics and specific functions which only either one can fill. In fact, in the complete absence of written records, it can be difficult to place oral accounts into a meaningful historical, social and cultural context.

3. THE VALUE OF ORAL HISTORY

One of the foundations of oral history is that it is best suited for the recovery of local history and for that reason it is mostly practised by local historians. It is suited and relevant in that it can broaden the local history data base and offer new perspectives on the events and forces that shaped local life and thought.²¹ The significance and the impact the Namoha Battle had on the ordinary Basotho can, for example, best be understood through the help of oral history. This can aid the present day generation to understand why the Namoha Village no longer exists. The testimonies of the eyewitnesses might further enlighten the present-day generation of the feelings, emotions and different perspectives of the Namoha incident. The accounts would also shed light on later developments which shaped the present day social life among the Basotho of Qwa-Qwa.²²

Oral history can create intimate portraits of people, places and communities in a way that other historical methods cannot. It allows the lives of ordinary people and groups who are under-represented in the records of the community their proper place in the history of their communities. Oral history can achieve this because it does consider everybody, particularly ordinary grassroots people, as a possible source of information and as an equal role-player in the reconstruction of the past.²³ Moreover, according to Willa K Baum, "what is too mundane to be recorded by one generation could have disappeared altogether in the next, and oral history offers a means of preserving not just individual lives, but also many different ways of life, from vanishing into obscurity".²⁴

¹⁹ Semela, p. 8.

²⁰ Fogerty, p. 156.

²¹ S Caunce, *Oral history and the local historian* (New York, 1994), p. 220.

²² Semela, p. 7.

²³ T Lummis, *Listening to history: The authenticity of oral evidence* (London, 1987), p. 156.

²⁴ Caunce, p. 220.

Furthermore, oral history offers a unique view of the past in that it takes into consideration the source's emotions, feelings, memories, experiences as well as possible factual knowledge of any event under study. What makes it distinct is that a *personal* story from a *personal* point of view is told about a particular event or events experienced *personally*.²⁵ These *personal* stories are important to people as their lives are made up of stories stored in their minds as memories and images of the past. As with anything that people do, sharing and giving is important to all. People have a need to tell and share personal stories, as this reminds them of where they have been. As people think of where they have been through their stories, they can begin to understand the patterns of their past that have had an influence on the way they behave in the present.²⁶

Once a story is told, oral history takes the experiences of the individuals and opens them up to a new world of shared encounters and events in which they have participated. Personal stories are not alive until they are told. A story comes to life when it is told, for all of the teller's background cultures, personal experiences, values, thoughts and beliefs combine with his or her facial nuances, gestures and body tensions to bring the story to its fullest living state.²⁷ These stories, having been verified and analysed, are placed into an accurate historical context, are turned into credible historical sources and are stored for use by current and future scholars. Thus people who were not aware of such experiences have a chance to know them and those interested in related research could consult and use them for background study.²⁸

Personal experience narratives of historical events told by the individuals directly involved in the action described in the story are often fascinating *human documents*.²⁹ A survivor of the Battle of Namoha, Pusetso Mofokeng, an ordinary Mosotho from Monontsha Village, for example, described his initial experience at the front this way:

"I was present at Namoha on that fateful day. When the first shot was fired we all lay down. Immediately thereafter we arose once more and began hopping like a group of ants. As I was running I felt like I was flying. I hid in a nearby river where I found two old men hiding. However, we were chased out by the bullets that were falling near us. Unfortunately the two old men were hit and fell. I took cover behind a big rock and immediately turned and faced the direction where I had come from so as to see if I was being followed. As I moved back I bumped into

²⁵ WK Baum, *Oral history for the local historical society* (Nashville, 1977), p. 8.

²⁶ Allen and Montell, p. 25.

²⁷ J Hoops, *Oral history: An introduction for students* (North Carolina, 1979), p. 8.

²⁸ Semela, p. 9.

²⁹ Allen and Montell, p. 15.

another person's back and I felt coldness all over me because I thought I had been caught. For a moment we both remained motionless. After some time I glanced back and discovered that it was someone I knew and felt relieved."³⁰

Furthermore, orally communicated history can reveal the human side of the past by also showing how historical events can dramatically change the course of an individual's life. One such account comes from Bakubung Mpheteng, an ordinary Mosotho from Kudumane Village, who recalled that his father was very active in the movement opposing the culling of cattle:

"As a child, I never had a chance to spend time with him. He was always in and out of the house. I did not have a father-figure. I also struggled to look after myself as I had no role-model. When he was imprisoned and exiled, life became even more difficult. My mother was selling traditional beer and fat cakes to feed us, and we would sometimes eat this *moroko*.³¹ Because of all these problems I dropped out of school to look for work. I could not find any decent job and I always did temporary jobs. For the past fifteen years I have not been working. I believe that had my father not suffered the way he did, I would have been somebody today. Today I am still suffering the consequences. I am not educated and I am unemployed and cannot provide for my family. I feel sad about the whole thing. Even the people on whose behalf my father suffered never bothered to help us during his absence. When he came back, many pretended to be taking care of us because they wanted something from him as he was a very intelligent man."³²

The information of individuals' interpretations or recollections of the past events, provided through interviews, is normally preserved in archives. The final product, whether it is a tape recording of an interview or transcript, reflects the combined efforts of the interviewer and interviewee in the creation of a unique historical account.³³ An interview is also subject to the same scholarly analysis and standards that a historian applies to other evidentiary sources. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the historian to sift and weigh all the evidence, and to use sources wisely in the preparation of historical accounts.³⁴ Carefully constructed, oral evidence has the

³⁰ **Personal collection**, tape-recording of interview with Mr Pusetso Mofokeng, an ordinary Mosotho from Monontsha Village, 26 March 2002.

³¹ "Traditional beer dreg or refuse." Freely translated.

³² **Personal collection**, transcript of interview with Mr Bakubung Mpheteng, an ordinary Mosotho from Kudumane Village, 4 April 2002.

³³ Semela, p. 11.

³⁴ M Gordon, and LA Jones, "Oral history", **Journal of American History**, Vol. 87, No. 2, September 2000, p. 580.

potential to be very valuable in enhancing the reconstruction of the history of any event.

As pointed out earlier, oral history is a unique way to learn about past events and experiences. Even when a subject is well documented oral sources can be useful. Many oral history projects are designed to elicit information that would supplement what is already available in written materials.³⁵ Certain kinds of specific information, such as the circumstantial detail surrounding a memorable event in the community's past, may be garnered from first hand eyewitness accounts, as is the case with the Namoha Battle. Eyewitness accounts can be used not only to supply factual details about an event, but also to provide information about a community's reactions to that event. The following eyewitness narrative of the 1950 Battle of Namoha in Qwa-Qwa not only describes the occurrence, but reports on the community's interpretation of it:

"I was present at Namoha on the day of the battle. What led to that battle was the Union government's intransigency to listen to our concerns. We were not happy about the preferential treatment given to the white traders in Witsieshoek and the imposed cattle culling process. We wanted fair and equal treatment. When our plea to the government to halt its cattle culling process failed and our call for a commission of enquiry was rejected, we interpreted the culling as the conquering of our cattle, something that required us to act against. Again, we saw it as the government's ploy to impoverish us so that we would go and work for the white people. Furthermore, the arrival of more police in the area confirmed our suspicions that the government was determined to force us to submit. We were killed at Namoha because we were protecting our rights, our cattle and the monarchy which was undermined by the union government. The attack on us was nothing else but an attempt to force us to submit."³⁶

Orally communicated history, as Tosh describes it, "is a method which probes memory, evokes emotions and feelings which have long been dormant, and creates a relationship between narrator and interviewer which is often a very special one".³⁷ Thus it is a means of obtaining historical evidence by enabling people to reach into their memories and recall elements of the past that affected them somehow and which are of historical value to the present. This was evident in the interviews in which the informants provided the insightful information into what had happened in 1950, and some even cried hysterically as they recalled how the 1950 battle affected them:

³⁵ Fogerty, p. 154.

³⁶ **Personal collection**, tape-recording of interview with Chief Setsoto Mopeli, a sub-chief at Poelong Village, 25 September 2001.

³⁷ Tosh, p. 189.

"I just had a small baby when my husband was brutally killed by the police. When I got back to the house after the shooting, I found my husband lying in a pool of blood in the house Just imagine what I was going through seeing my husband in that position. I was devastated. I became a widow and my children became orphans. As a single parent, it became very difficult for me to raise my children accordingly. The reason why I am still staying in a dilapidated mud-house is simply because of the Namoha Battle."³⁸

Andor Skotnes sees oral history as an investigative tool for examining and documenting whole areas of social development in a particular community, for which written records are missing or incomplete.³⁹ The lack of written and the existence of incomplete records about the Namoha Village, once the centre of resistance for the Basotho, essentially necessitated the undertaking of this oral history research project. The creation and demolition of the Namoha village left behind no written traces of its origin and dissolution. Yet the people who were involved in building the village, the former residents, and individuals familiar with Namoha history, provided a richly detailed oral description of life in that village and indicated the extent to which the entire community was affected. Mantshepeng Mopeli, an ordinary Mosotho from Monontsha Village, said:

"Namoha Village was situated between Monontsha and Poelong villages. It came into existence in the early 1940s. This piece of land was handed to a sub-chief, Morena Moreneng Mopeli, after he had been ordered to move away from a place called Boiketlo, a very fertile piece of land on top of the mountains above Monontsha Village. This place, Namoha Village, was given this name because two sub-chiefs, Morena Pikoko Mopeli of Monontsha Village and Morena Libe Mopeli of Ha-Libe, were ordered to reduce their areas and give Morena Moreneng a place to stay. As the Basotho put it, Moreneng said: 'Pikoko namoha le nna ke dule.'⁴⁰ The Namoha Village became the centre for resistance and the battle that was fought in 1950 took place at this village. Immediately after the battle, the residents were forced to move to other areas. In the process, people got hurt as they were mishandled by the police and lost a number of valuables and left behind gardens and fields with growing crops."⁴¹

³⁸ **Personal collection**, tape-recording of interview with Mrs Makhanya Motolo, an ordinary Mosotho from Monontsha Village, 19 September 2001.

³⁹ A Skotnes, "People's archives and oral history in South Africa: A traveller's account", **South African Archives Journal**, Vol. 37, 1995, p. 63.

⁴⁰ "Pikoko fold your legs so that I can get a place". Freely translated.

⁴¹ **Personal collection**, transcript of interview with Mrs Mantshepeng Mopeli, an ordinary Mosotho from Monontsha Village, 28 March 2002.

The sense of community is heightened when local narratives, some old and some recent, are recounted about a variety of subjects. The accounts of the way the community acquired its name, for example, are considered part of local history. How the name came about and the succeeding local events all contributed to the development of the community. An investigation into the community's past can shed a great deal of light on how a community organised itself during difficult times; how they dealt with the challenges of raising families, making a living or building a community.⁴²

Oral history captures the life, information and bits and pieces of the data that would otherwise be lost to posterity. It serves to fill in the gaps in formal learning, often providing the rest of the story. In some of the records of the Namoha Battle, for example, it is stated that "the police had no choice but to shoot the Basotho as they were under threat".⁴³ But this was disputed by almost all the informants who claimed that the police, as much as they were doing their job, shot at the Basotho first even though they were under no threat. Their position can help to clarify how the shooting actually occurred and provide a perspective of the ordinary people.⁴⁴

The recordings of people's memories and experiences are used for various purposes. They could be collected to complement, supplement or disprove written sources or just as a contribution to historical knowledge. Thus it is, as Kris D Conti describes it, "the living history of everyone's unique life experiences which can be recorded on sound and video tape or written down".⁴⁵ Oral history is a vital tool for the understanding of the recent past and it can preserve everyone's past for the future. It enables people who have been hidden from history to be considered; those interested in their past to record their personal experiences and those of their families and communities.

Oral history also enriches the understanding of an historical event. It offers another point of view, and can, for instance, elicit empathy on the part of the interviewer and engage the interviewer and the interviewee in constructing a historical record. Oral history can promote the value of considering multiple interpretations of historical events.⁴⁶

If written records were not available or were incomplete many studies could not have been written at all without oral history evidence. Biographers frequently find great lacunae in documentary evidence for certain areas of their subjects' lives.

⁴² Allen and Montell, pp. 50-1.

⁴³ **Rand Daily Mail**, 5 December 1950.

⁴⁴ Semela, p. 14.

⁴⁵ KD Conti, "Oral histories: The most overlooked public relations tool", **Communication World**, Vol. 12, No. 2, June/July 1995, p. 52.

⁴⁶ IM Olmedo, "Family oral histories for multi-cultural curriculum perspectives", **Urban Education**, Vol. 32, No.1, p. 331.

Michael Holroyd is one; he says: "On the life of my subjects I needed information and, often, information that was not in written form."⁴⁷ Researchers of contemporary history would often find they have few documentary sources to guide them. Without oral evidence, their work would consist largely of the regurgitation of secondary evidence such as books, newspaper accounts and so on, which might well be incomplete. To be confronted by a vast mass of documentary evidence can be as bewildering as having to reconstruct the story from secondary sources alone. Oral history evidence can give a researcher synoptic accounts of whole areas for which no overall survey exists.⁴⁸

Oral history provides at least one dimension that is missing from written documents, namely, sound. Even if every fact of conceivable historical interest was recorded on paper, there would still be a role for oral history because of its unique advantage of providing historical material that can be reproduced in sound and image. Oral history interviews can thus be used in a variety of ways such as on television, radio, pre-recorded educational cassettes in museums and exhibitions. It deploys the voices of the past to bring history in a vivid form to a wide audience, some of whom might never have been introduced to the same material, if presented only in writing.⁴⁹

Furthermore, secondary sources may not be sufficiently enlightening, and many, like newspapers, disguise sources. If, for example, researchers do not know on whose evidence a newspaper report is based, they will not always know how much weight to attach to it.⁵⁰ Oral history interviews allow the researcher to penetrate below the surface and to discover for oneself what is vital and what is secondary.

Oral history evidence can furthermore augment the existing official documentary sources whilst documenting the activities and feelings of many minority groups in society. It has the potential, also, of bringing a community together. While investigating the history of a local area, the past is quite literally brought to life for its people.⁵¹ This study, for example, gave rise to the joint annual commemoration of the Namoha Battle, between the Basotho who were opposed to the battle and those who took part in it. The coming together to reminisce about the battle opened up communications, and people can now freely talk about it. The annual commemoration will help keep the memories of the battle alive to the people affected and will hopefully serve to foster good relations.

⁴⁷ M Holroyd, "What is oral history?" as quoted by A Seldon and J Pappworth, in **By word of mouth**, p. 36.

⁴⁸ A Seldon, and J Pappworth, **By word of mouth: An élite oral history** (London, 1983), p. 43.

⁴⁹ **Ibid.**, p. 52.

⁵⁰ Seldon and Pappworth, p. 43.

⁵¹ DC Swain, "Problems for practitioners of oral history", **American Archivist**, Vol. 28, No. 1, January 1965, p. 68.

As the years separate people further and further from an historical event, a good tape-recording of experiences will, in the future, be listened to with fascination.⁵² This would be comparable only to the wonder that people would experience today if someone were to present them with the voices of men and women who had fought during the Anglo-Boer South African War. It would affirm that the picture of the 'agterryer' in that War would be incomplete without his or her voice and his or her memories.⁵³

Oral history modifies and enriches a people's understanding of the historical process. It foments empathy by encouraging learners to see the world through the eyes of other people. Presenting the *personal* dimension, oral history connects real people to the past. Students of history may even come to see themselves as historical actors in the making who may later also appear on the stage of history.⁵⁴

In tape-recording an interview there is an opportunity to reach into the experience of an event through answers to questions not asked at the time of the event. Researchers may wish to know something that was not recorded in any contemporary sense and, then, they may, by oral evidence, be given personal perspectives on matters of great interest, for which there can never be a superabundance of evidence (for example, life in the front line in 1916, in the First World War).⁵⁵ Oral history provides information about the narrators and their experiences beyond the mere statement of dates and events.

Oral history testimony is the kind of information that makes other public documents understandable. Researchers may know, for example, from the records what had happened during the Namoha Battle and how many people were wounded or killed. But oral history reveals activities of ordinary people, their understanding and interpretation of what happened and why and how they were affected by the battle. It is through oral history that the dimension of life within a community is illuminated. Miroslav Volf points out that "there is no doubt that the strength of having the accounts of various dimensions of life put together in one lived experience gives all the data a particular strength in virtually any other source of evidence, and certainly lacking in any other widespread documentary proof".⁵⁶

⁵² **Ibid.**, p. 73.

⁵³ Semela, p. 17.

⁵⁴ MS Grocco, "Putting the actors back on stage: Oral history in the secondary school classroom", **Social Studies**, Vol. 89, No. 1, January/February 1988, p. 19.

⁵⁵ PH Liddle and MJ Richardson, "Voices from the past: An evaluation of oral history as a source for research into the Western Front experience of the British soldier, 1914- 1918", **Journal of Contemporary History**, Vol. 31, No. 4, 1996, p. 653.

⁵⁶ M Volf, "Redeeming the past?", **Christian Century**, Vol. 119, No. 4, 13 February 2002, p. 44.

Furthermore, the oral history interview process totally differs from a journalistic interview.⁵⁷ It affords participants in historical events an opportunity to address the historical record directly. It also clarifies what they see as misconceptions in a third person's accounts. It provides an opportunity to discuss the participants' own motives and those of other participants and to provide their own personal assessment of the significance of the events in which they took part. This approach makes possible a clearer understanding of the intent of the participants than could be inferred from a record of the events alone.⁵⁸ When viewed from this perspective, oral history is one of the most important analytical tools available to researchers today and its importance is very likely to grow.

Oral history is also important to both families and society. Traditional information about a variety of episodes in a family's history is often passed from one generation to another in oral form. Such traditional knowledge often constitutes a family saga. The sagas, while varying from one family to the other, are stories that frequently deal with similar themes, such as hardships, family misfortunes, why and when that happened and the family's experiences during trying times. The following account by Mantsane Mopeli, an ordinary Mosotho from Monontsha Village, exemplifies that:

"I was suffering, even though I was the only child at home. We had one blanket that I shared with my mother. My father was always away from home to attend to the needs of our Chief in exile. We could not even plough for ourselves and we had to rely on our neighbours for help. We struggled to make ends meet. Worse, we even lost, through theft, almost all my father's livestock I could not understand why we had to suffer the way we suffered. Despite all these, we understood my father's loyalty to the Chief."⁵⁹

The family stories of this nature function to illustrate the family's role in the community's social structure and the events that shaped it and how the family was affected by those changes. Oral history can be used for various reasons and it depends upon the spirit in which it is used. Nevertheless, it certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. It can be used to change the focus of history itself and open up new areas of enquiry. It can break down the barriers between teachers and students, between generations, between educational institutions and the world outside and in the writing of history, whether in books or museums. It can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ The oral history interview is not a quick journalistic style of interviewing. Instead, it requires a patient and slow style that is sensitive and respectful to the interviewee's circumstances.

⁵⁸ Volf, p. 9.

⁵⁹ **Personal collection**, transcript interview with Mrs Mantsane Mopeli, an ordinary Mosotho from Monontsha Village, 1 April 2002.

⁶⁰ Liddle and Richardson, p. 2.

Furthermore, through oral history the interviewed respondents could also experience benefits. Oral history can help them link and understand fragmented memories. It can also help them to locate their memories in the context of their life stories. Oral history interviewing can further help respondents to review and re-value their memories and to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of decision-making in the past. This could lead to a possible release of burdensome feelings from the past. All these could be attained when people reminisce about the past events either individually or collectively with the help of the interviewer.

Furthermore, through the dissemination of stories, various possibilities could open up for the interviewees. Firstly, people could re-define themselves by seeing and hearing their stories in the public realm and see that they are not alone and that they have shared memories, which connect them to others. Secondly, people could learn more about the stories and heritage of their community. Thirdly, they could rebuild a sense of collectivity and community pride through participating in, and witnessing the sounds and images of their community heritage.

Oral history is also useful in the classroom. Teachers who want to include multicultural perspectives in their curriculum can explore the treasury of knowledge of the parents of their students and members of the community by using oral history projects in the classrooms. Such projects can be an authentic way of making the curriculum multicultural.⁶¹ Teachers will also find maintaining student interest in academic content an ever-present challenge. If they were to guide their students by means of oral history research, they would likely find them highly keen in documenting history. By promoting creative use of oral history projects, history teachers can help their students design oral history research programmes for use in their classrooms. Given time constraints and the demands of transcription, oral history projects could be a productive strategy for Social Studies teachers.⁶²

By presenting oral history research as a systematic process, teachers can motivate students by the collaborative and empirical approach to historical study. According to Tina Sitton, student-generated oral history research is "a powerful antidote to students' frequent apathy to textbook studies of history".⁶³ The inclusion of oral history projects does not replace textbooks and other secondary sources. Undoubtedly, textbooks and other sources have an important function, presenting facts and ordering specific events. One quality that textbooks often lack, however, is the human element, as Grace Huerta, observes: "They say that it comes as no surprise to social studies teachers to hear their students lament "This book is so boring!" or

⁶¹ J Banks, **Integrating the curriculum with ethnic content: Approaches and guidelines** (Boston, 1989), p. 189.

⁶² TK Meyer, "It's not just common sense: a blueprint for teaching oral history", **Oral History Review**, Vol. 25, No.1-2, 1998, p. 56.

⁶³ T Sitton, **Oral history. A guide for teachers** (Austin, 1983), p. 3.

'Why do we always have to read about dead people?'"⁶⁴ Given oral history's emotional appeal, teachers could find that oral history as a supplementary teaching tool can bring dry facts and information to life.

The primary objective of oral history projects is to broaden the students' understanding of events, periods and themes by offering them the perspectives of those who lived them. When students go beyond the role of passive learner to active researcher, they become active participants in the learning process. According to Sitton, oral history research is an effective learning tool because it "teaches academic and interpersonal life skills in a real-world, experiential context".⁶⁵ An oral history project does not necessarily require students to study in isolation, but usually in groups. By encouraging students to work on their projects in small groups, teachers can hold the students accountable for their contributions.⁶⁶ The co-operative learning approach also makes a seemingly insurmountable task achievable and when all students are involved in the design of the oral history project they become even more active.

When gathering oral history, students gain valuable skills that can improve their reading skills. They tend to become more active listeners and acquire better inquiry skills. As students collect oral history, their interest in the study of the past often increases. That method of gathering information often provides a sense of immediacy about history that cannot be gained from reading.⁶⁷

Paul Thompson highlights how inquiry, language, social and technical skills develop through the use of oral history.⁶⁸ Students actively listen to the individuals they are interviewing so that they can better probe the respondents. They usually become more adept at raising and articulating ideas, and communicating with the people from different generations and backgrounds. Because conducting an interview requires sound experience on the part of the interviewer, students need to be carefully guided and made to feel comfortable with the process, especially when interviews are taped.⁶⁹ The key to conducting a good interview is the ability to ask stimulating questions. A good listener then prompts the person to provide more details.

⁶⁴ H Huerta and LA Flemmer, "Using student generated oral history research in the secondary classroom", *Clearing House*, Vol. 74, No. 2, November/December 2000, p. 106.

⁶⁵ Sitton, p. 3.

⁶⁶ PP Heppner, and TR Thomas, "Using oral history in teaching the history of counselling", *Counsellor Education and Supervision*, Vol. 34, No. 1, September 1994, p. 68.

⁶⁷ Oosthuizen, p. 16.

⁶⁸ P Thompson, *The voice of the past* (Oxford, 1989), p. 103.

⁶⁹ JA Neuenschwander, *Oral history as a teaching approach* (Washington DC, 1975), p. 152.

Once students understand that written testimony is shaped and understood in the same manner as oral evidence, they are less anxious about engaging in challenging reading assignments. Because students interview people in their own community, they need to place their findings in a larger, more general context. Research projects based on varied types of sources encourage students to compare, contrast and place their interviews in the larger context they have developed by reading and viewing films.⁷⁰

As teachers validate the life experiences of families, they also enhance the self-concept of students and broaden their own knowledge about the cultures from which the students come. Students and teachers discover that families have something worth sharing. They are able to recognize both the common characteristics that they share with other ethnic groups and the uniqueness of their own family and ethnic group.⁷¹

Students learn to analyse raw data, extract what is important or relevant for developing a narrative, begin to understand patterns, compare and contrast their experiences with those of others and carry out research with reference materials to broaden their understanding of events referred to in the interviews. Their self-concept is enhanced as they understand that the experiences of their families and ethnic groups are a part of history and have a legitimate place in the school curriculum.⁷² Thus, by using oral history, students are able both to experience some of the issues in qualitative research as well as to carry out a piece of practical work.⁷³

4. ORAL HISTORY AND OTHER FORMS OF HISTORY

The significance of oral history as discussed above is realised partly when it is used in conjunction with other forms of history. Orally communicated history is a valid and valuable source of information, as oral tradition and written history complement one another. Each body of knowledge possesses qualities that, taken together, form a comprehensive historical record. Alone, each one is incomplete, but together they form an harmonious union, with the one offering objective interpretation based upon sound evidence, and the other giving a personalised immediacy, a sense of being there and of participation. By accumulating sources of information and comparing them, we can arrive at an approximate understanding of what happened or what is happening and hold this information with some certainty.

⁷⁰ WJ Wilson, and DM Memory, "Accommodating weak readers in history research projects: Using varied types of sources", *Social Studies*, Vol. 92, No. 4, July/August 2001, p. 163.

⁷¹ J Banks, *Integrating the curriculum with ethnic content: Approaches and guidelines. Multicultural education: Issues and perspectives* (Boston, 1989), p. 206.

⁷² Neuenschwander, p. 153.

⁷³ S Pile, "Oral history and teaching qualitative methods", *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1992, p. 135.

But there is never absolute certainty about any event, about any fact, no matter what sources are used. No single source or combination of them can ever give a complete picture of the total complexity of the reality.⁷⁴ Valerie Yow attests to this when she says: "We cannot reconstruct a past or present event in its entirety, because the evidence is fragmentary."⁷⁵

The specialists of orality distinguish two approaches and methodologies of orally communicated history. These are oral history and oral tradition. Oral history, as defined earlier, is based on eyewitnesses' accounts about the events and situations which are contemporary. It differs from oral traditions in that oral traditions are no longer contemporary. Oral traditions have been transmitted orally for a period beyond the lifetime of the informants.⁷⁶ The two methodologies typically are very different with regard to the collection of sources as well as with regard to their analysis.

Oral historians typically interview participants about events experienced, often of a dramatic nature, when the historical consciousness in the communities involved is still in flux. For this reason Jan Vansina calls oral history "immediate history".⁷⁸ Interviews of this nature are always compared to available written or printed information. The goal is to save sources from oblivion, to come to a first hand assessment of the events/situations studied and to promote consciousness among the actors of the happenings themselves.⁷⁸

Oral tradition, unlike oral history, focuses mainly on the past beyond the recall of one's lifespan. The term is normally applied to the practice of those historians working on the history of non-literate societies. This is a very difficult area of historical work where the oral traditions of a people are used to reconstruct their chronology, migrations and political and cultural history. It is difficult because often there is no written evidence available to support the oral evidence or cross check it against. Oral tradition changes constantly from generation to generation. It changes as the interests, opinions, fears and needs of each generation change. Thus the process of transmission from generation to generation presents problems of validity, which do not apply to memories of direct experiences. This aspect of oral tradition is the central subject-matter of oral history.⁷⁹ Furthermore, what is distinctive about the information passed from one generation to another is that it is what someone has been told and not about their personal experiences.

⁷⁴ SB Oluwole, **Philosophy and oral tradition** (Lagos, 1997), p. 10.

⁷⁵ V Yow, **A practical guide for social scientists** (London, 1994), p. 22.

⁷⁶ J Vansina, **Oral tradition as history** (London, 1985), pp. 12-3.

⁷⁷ **Ibid.**, p. 13.

⁷⁸ Semela, p. 25.

⁷⁹ Lummis, p. 26.

As information is transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to it, it becomes oral tradition. It is the most traditional way of re-telling and learning history, and it is the oldest form of recorded history.⁸⁰ The Sesotho oral tradition, for example, was and is still, though to a lesser degree, central to the Sesotho way of life. Story-telling to children was the way in which history, customs, beliefs and values were passed on from generation to generation. Stories were usually told in the evening around the fire, often by grandmothers. Most of these stories had a moral lesson and were used to teach the importance of certain values in an interesting and entertaining way. All the traditional stories had songs that were sung at intervals while the story was being told.⁸¹

Oral traditions include not only oral history but also poems, songs, legends and stories. Judging from the definition of oral tradition, folktales and folksongs clearly played an important and unifying function in society. As Patrick Mbunwe-Samba observes, some tales were meant to warn against disobedience and disrespect towards elders, while songs like lullabies played a role in the care of babies. He adds that, in contrast, scientific theories and explanations are still speculative because myths and legends will continue to be created even today.⁸²

Thompson, in trying to create a simpler and more vivid picture of oral tradition, refers to it as a "national tradition which everybody, peasants, townsfolk, old men and women, even children said and repeated".⁸³ This definition suggests that the spoken word of a people about its past constitutes oral tradition when it is passed down from one generation to another. It only becomes history when it has been recorded by historians. The historians' recording will consist of oral testimony, which is described by Leslie Whitz as an interviewee's 'personal life history', revealing what happened and also providing the feeling or mood for an event.⁸⁴

Both oral and written histories serve as existing histories, and also as historical sources from which historians obtain evidence. They are also used together to balance out the accounts of events given by either one. That is to say that they are compared to one another so as to try and gain a clearer picture of the events to which they are referring.⁸⁵ A historian, for example, studying the life of TK Mopeli,⁸⁶ would read the written accounts of his life and interview people who knew him very well. The historian would then compare and contrast the written and oral information, so as to see where they corroborate or conflict and why. Thus, it is

⁸⁰ P Mbunwe-Samba, **Oral traditions and the African past** (London, 1989), p. 64.

⁸¹ Oluwole, p. 6.

⁸² Allen and Montell, p. 33.

⁸³ Thompson, p. 22.

⁸⁴ L Whitz, **Write your own history** (Cape Town, 1988), p. 40.

⁸⁵ Lummis, p. 160.

⁸⁶ The former Prime Minister of the then Qwa-Qwa homeland.

important that historians use not only oral but also written sources as not one method of recounting history is flawless.⁸⁷

As indicated earlier, while written documents supply factual information about the whys and wherefores of historical events, orally communicated history often expresses how people felt about those events, how they reacted to them and how the events affected their lives.⁸⁸ Eyewitness accounts of historical occurrences often provide the human dimension by reporting not only the details of what happened, but the emotional responses of the individuals to the events themselves. The following account by Piet Mokoena, an ordinary Mosotho from Thaba Tshoana village, reveals the following:

"The Namoha Battle took place on 27 November 1950. On a shiny afternoon a big crowd gathered at Namoha and we were singing and dancing when we suddenly saw the police approaching us. We were deeply concerned because we knew we were not supposed to have any gathering of more than five people. When they came closer, they stopped and ordered us to disperse as our gathering was illegal. We ignored the order to disperse and when the police opened fire, we retaliated by throwing stones and sticks at them as we ran away. Nobody expected it. As I was there, I witnessed this, as people ran away in different directions yelling and crying After the fighting had stopped, other people came back to assist the wounded and placed the dead together. The battle was followed by mass arrests, trial and conviction of some people. I shall never forget the sound of those guns, the crying and moaning of people and the blood that was all over the area where the confrontation began. It was such a tragedy that something like that happened."⁸⁹

Written records usually refer to what happened, while oral sources almost invariably provide insights into the human element. The written history is ideally considered objective. Orally communicated history on the other hand, deriving as it does from the personal experiences of individuals, tends to be viewed more as subjective and evaluative. The individual and community attitudes are clearly expressed in oral accounts of historical events.⁹⁰ The story, told by the Basotho, about feelings running high between the Basotho and the white people in the neighbouring towns and farms, is revealing in that regard. It contains the notion held by the Basotho community that the white people had no right to interfere in their affairs, even though the Basotho were under the control of the white government. Chief Disala Mopeli, a sub-chief at Thaba Bosiu Village, revealed:

⁸⁷ Oluwole, p. 10.

⁸⁸ Allen and Montell, p. 36.

⁸⁹ Thompson, p. 22.

⁹⁰ Seldon and Pappworth, p. 21.

"We were very angry about what the white people did to us in our own land. We were not expecting any interference from the Whites as we had our own Paramount Chief and his council who had the right to make decisions for us. We were attacked for no apparent reason except to force us to submit to white rule. After the Namoha Battle, because we refused to surrender, even white farmers and those in neighbouring towns wanted to attack us and they chased us away from their shops. After the battle nothing of the proposed improvements such as cattle culling continued, thus we felt justified in rejecting those measures in the first place."⁹¹

Written history of all kinds, whether on the international, national, regional or local levels, typically deals narrowly with wars, elections, inventions, depressions, disasters, heroes, and other events that change the course of history. Despite the fact that important historical events may be better understood when they are placed within the context of the typical conditions under which life was lived, the routine activities of everyday life, such as childhood pass times, family life, courting customs and other social patterns, have generally been neglected by many formal historians. The lack of descriptions of ordinary people doing ordinary things gives very little idea of what the past was like for the people who experienced the history altering events. Through orally recorded life stories of ordinary citizens, as well as outstanding ones, an entire historical era or geographical region may be portrayed.⁹²

Reality is composed of both fact and perception, so documents alone do not come close to telling the whole truth, and while a researcher cannot fully re-create the reality or atmosphere of the period under investigation, they can get quite close by restoring the human will and human agency to what happened. Debating the superiority of either documentary or oral evidence is essentially sterile because both are essential in creating a complete historical account.⁹³ The value of each can be enhanced when it is used along with the other because they have been set down at different times and were subject to different personal biases, contemporary pressures and social conventions. They should be used to illuminate the defects of each other rather than to be seen as simple contradictions. Oral evidence is incomplete in itself; it is even more partial to imagine that the history of a class society can be written from evidence drawn only from one section. To realise its potential it must be related to the testimony of others and triangulated with documentary and material evidence.⁹⁴

⁹¹ **Personal collection**, tape-recording of interview with Chief Disala Mopeli, a sub-chief at Thaba Bosiu Village, 23 September 2001.

⁹² Seldon and Pappworth, p. 63.

⁹³ MJ Jordan, "Race to record cold war's inside story", **Christian Science Monitor**, Vol. 91, No. 147, 25 June 1999, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Lummis, p. 155.

Despite being complementary to each other, there are distinct differences between spoken and written sources. In the first place, the circumstances under which sources were originally produced should be considered. Though sources might relate to a common period and constellation of events, they are produced at different times and under quite different conditions. The documentary sources are contemporary with the events to which they relate. The events and the sources, in this respect, are of one time and the document can, therefore, be presented as a symbol of its own age. The interview data in contrast are produced after the time of which they speak.⁹⁵

Secondly, the two sources are also distinctly different in terms of the audience for whom they are produced. The documents relating to the topic under investigation are the products of formal discourses. They are always knowingly constructed as expressions that are essentially public and permanent. The oral data, in contrast, are the product of an immediate dialogue of which the interviewers are active parts and which, whatever the public uses to which the outcomes might be put, often has the character of a private and intimate personal conversation.⁹⁶ They stand as they are spoken, in contrast to the document, which may be redrafted and restyled many times before it is ready to go before its public.

5. CONCLUSION

The article highlights the definition, value and interaction of oral history and other forms of history. The definition of oral history as used in this article is, simply put, history about ordinary people remembering the past, through speech and what they did in the past and how the history affected and changed their lives. Oral history is a means that allows the grassroots people to produce their own history. It is also useful in the classroom. Armed with oral history methodology, teachers are in a good position to help students to participate fully in research projects and thus lay a foundation for future research.

As seen above, oral tradition and oral history share a common element. While it is easy to propose distinctions between them, it is more difficult to sustain the differences in practice, because there are much more similarities in the ways they are collected, processed, stored and made available to researchers and in the equipment required to record and preserve these materials. Moreover, although orally communicated history is different in kind from written sources, in that it is richer in communicative power, containing as it does, inflections, hesitations, expressions and nuances not reproducible in written form, they both rely heavily upon each other. Both approaches have their own benefits. The fact that oral

⁹⁵ P Gardner and P Cunningham, "Oral history and teachers' professional practice: A wartime turning point?", *Cambridge Journal of Education*, Vol. 27, No. 3, November 1997, p. 331.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

evidence can fill in the gaps within the written records, and that a background study is necessary for a successful oral history project, confirms this. Oral history has an important role to play in the collection of historical evidence. It serves as a means of transmitting and preserving the voices of those who, for a number of reasons, have not been heard in conventional written sources. Oral history preserves the past for us to remember, cherish and learn useful lessons.