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# RECORDING LIVING MEMORY IN SOUTH AFRICA<sup>1</sup>

The need for oral history in South Africa

Tina Sideris

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In South Africa, as in other countries, the techniques of oral history can open up many new areas for historical enquiry. Social history has benefited immensely by the ability of oral history to throw light on topics such as family history, marriage arrangements, popular culture and informal sector activities. In addition, oral history has the vital value of broadening the sources of historical information to include the voices and perspectives of ordinary people. This is especially important in South Africa where repression and discrimination have muted the voice of the majority of people.

There is, however, another dimension in South Africa which makes the argument for the collection of oral history even stronger, both for academic research as well as for popular use. For a number of reasons the history of the popular classes has not been well documented. The state in its official history has made a concerted attempt to deny the creative role played by all but the white ruling minority in the making of South African history. Moreover, illiteracy has militated against the systematic documentation of activities and organisation amongst the dominated groups. The informal nature of much popular organisation has meant that records and archival storage of the organisations' activities do not exist. Where official records have been kept by, for example, trade unions or political organisation, many of these have been confiscated and destroyed by the state. Repression in the form of censorship and banning has also removed many sources of historical investigations. And of course clandestine activities do not lend themselves to detailed and meticulous documentation for the benefit of future historians. They do however form a very powerful and rich source of reminiscence and historical information. It is these areas, inaccessible to conventional methods of investigation, that the method of oral history allows the historian to explore.

In the light of these problems and the bias of official South African history and official records, oral testimony is very often the only alternative source for

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researchers' attempting to construct a more comprehensive picture of the past and wanting to correct official history. Many academic historians, however, question the reliability of oral sources, arguing that oral testimony is often too subjective, inaccurate, contains distortions and that individual memory is unreliable and subject to subsequent changes in people's perspectives.

Paul Thompson has countered these criticisms by arguing that documentary evidence and written sources — social statistics, newspaper reports, published biographies and so on — are influenced by the prevailing ideological climate in which they were recorded and are in many cases derived from human exchange. Thompson argues that the general rules for examining all evidence for reliability can be applied to oral sources as well. That is, they can be checked for internal consistency, cross checked with other sources and other interviews, and as with all sources the researcher must be aware of potential bias. In addition he discusses the importance of symbolic meaning in anecdotes and stories told, as possible indicators of the values and attitudes held by social groups.<sup>2</sup>

Some academics involved in the field of oral history have taken the debate further, arguing that the form of the evidence is as important as the content. Renato Rosaldo argues that "What people say is (as) inseparable from how they say it."<sup>3</sup>

Luisa Passerini's work highlights the significance of silences, self-censorship and repression in testimony. For example, during her research she discovered that people had consistently erased whole periods of Fascist rule in Italy from memory. "This self-censorship is evidence of a scar, a violent annihilation of many years in human lives, a profound wound in daily experience."<sup>4</sup>

The Popular Memory Group (Birmingham) argue that the facts cannot be extracted from testimony without also investigating the conditions, structures and processes which have formed lived experiences. At the same time they argue that it is essential to focus on the ways in which informants have made sense of their life experience in interviews and the "general cultural repertoires, features of language and codes of expression which determine what may be said, how and to what effect."<sup>5</sup>

Oral history enriches academic history, but it also has vital political importance. The Popular Memory Group make the point that memory is a powerful way to uncover the 'past-present relation'. They argue that "It is because the past has this living active existence in the present that it matters so much politically."<sup>6</sup>

For a number of reasons, the vital political importance of oral history to popular organisations in South Africa is clear. First, investigating previously closed

areas, such as popular values, informal welfare arrangements and family structures that people develop, can give us important insights into the history of popular consciousness. Secondly, collecting oral testimony uncovers common-sense beliefs. This opens up the possibility for people to examine these beliefs and their roots, accept them, reject them or adapt them to their present situations. Thirdly and related to this is the point that emphasising the role that social experience plays in the making of history can help to counter ruling ideology. E P Thompson argues:

How else, at a time like our own, are we to suppose that there can ever be any human remedy to the hegemonic domination of the mind, the false descriptions of reality reproduced daily by the media? Experience I (lived experience) is in eternal friction with imposed consciousness, and, as it breaks through, we, who fight in all the intricate vocabularies and disciplines of Experience II (perceived experience) are given moments of openness and opportunity before the mould of ideology is imposed once more<sup>17</sup>

Fourthly, understanding the past from the point of view of the oppressed people in South Africa is important because this can play a role in restoring a sense of pride and confidence in them. Finally, reconstructing past struggles from the point of view of the ordinary people involved can help to get beyond the sentimental and romantic notions of political organisation and struggle, to convey the complex reality and contradictions.<sup>8</sup> This is important in getting a more comprehensive picture of resistance. It is out of this picture that the lessons of the past can be drawn, and through this that the mass membership is given the possibility of questioning the mistakes of leadership.

Of course for oral history to play this role it is necessary to use the oral history method carefully and skillfully. This will be discussed in more detail later. What should be noted here is the all-important need for sensitivity in the interview situation. Accepting that the resulting testimony is a product of the interaction between the interviewer and the informant, it is crucial that the interviewer is aware of the bias or influence he/she may bring to the interview. More important is the need to be aware of the inequality which may be present in the situation. This inequality is especially evident where for example, a black working class witness is subject to the investigation of a white professional historian, who takes the evidence away to analyse, interpret and explain it. In this context, the inequality is not only inherent in the interview itself, but also in the fact that the informant has no control over the final product and may not even be able to read it.



While this inequality can be dealt with at the level of individual personal relations, attempts can also be made to change it on a wider scale. At the very least the oral evidence can be presented in a form which is accessible to a wide range of people. This could allow those who have limited access to formal channels of expression to communicate their points of view to a public audience. In addition people in similar situations can identify with and see reflected in other people's testimony their own experiences enabling them to make some kind of sense of their situations. "Through such books many people are able to find large parts of themselves because they shared the same or similar environment or experience." Some community-based local history projects have made much progress in breaking down the gap between the experts and ordinary people. For example in England, members of these community projects do not only yield information, but are integrally involved in writing, production and consumption of historical material. With the focus on the day-to-day reality of lived experience, oral history lends itself well to community-based activity and collective ways of producing history. The repressive nature of South African society makes collective activity around oral history more difficult to organise. However it is precisely in this context that oral history can be used most effectively in peoples' struggle to take control of their lives.

### **The SAIRR Oral History Project**

In 1982 the oral history project of the SA Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR) was established with three full time members of staff and a part time secretary. Two types of oral evidence were collected. The first of these were interviews with individuals who had been involved in political and labour organisations which formed part of the movement of resistance to the South African government in the 1940s and 1950s. These interviews were not grouped or organised around specific themes, and interviewers were randomly selected. The interviews were done to record and preserve the testimony of activists from a range of organisations. This type of interview was categorised as archival.

The second category of interviews was organised around more specific themes. Evidence was collected from groups of people involved in a particular event or doing the same kind of work. A common aim of this project was to make the testimony collected available to a wider audience. This finally took the form of booklets, designed to be accessible to a wide range of people. The booklets were written in easy to read language and a simple style, contained much visual material and had an uncomplicated layout. It is instructive to look at the methodology in greater detail.

## Archival interviews

In all, thirty interviews were conducted, many of which are over two hours long. Transcripts of all but two of the interviews have been made according to a standardised pattern of transcription to indicate pauses, silences and laughter. The people interviewed were activists of varying prominence in organisations such as the ANC, the South African Federation of Women, SA Council of Trade Unions (SACTU), the SA Communist Party (SACP) and the Unity Movement. Informants were randomly selected throughout the country. Given the sensitive nature of the material in the South African context, many of the informants placed restrictions on the use of the material by researchers.

The interviews collected have helped address the need of preserving the testimony of people involved in resistance. In addition, they have been useful resource and background material for popular and academic historians wanting to conduct more detailed research. Some of the interviews have also been useful to researchers outside South Africa who have limited access to primary sources.

However a number of weaknesses can be identified in the interviews.

- 1 The evidence tends to focus on a description and discussion of broad political events with very little emphasis on local and personal experiences. Areas such as family relationships and the complex reality of struggle were not adequately investigated.
- 2 Conventional interpretations and information available elsewhere tended to be duplicated.
- 3 Large parts of the interviews tended to be simply anecdotal. The value of these anecdotes and the meanings behind them were not explored in any systematic way. This meant that most of the stories did not go beyond livening up the material.
- 4 Distorted and inaccurate testimony is also evident in some of the interviews. This is not necessarily a major problem. As the way in which people remember experiences can tell us a lot about their social position, as well as about the effect of present experiences on their perceptions of the past.
- 5 In the South African context the importance of interviewing activists involved in resistance is obvious. However the balancing testimony of rank and file members is crucial for a deeper understanding of the complex nature of this resistance. Interviewing a wide range of people is also useful for checking the accuracy of evidence. The archival interviews focused too much on leaders and prominent activists.

It is important to add here that the enthusiasm of most of the people interviewed did generate some fresh historical evidence and fascinating anecdotes. However on the whole these areas tended to remain unexplored and undeveloped.

In summary, the weaknesses in the archival interviews point to the need for more careful planning and execution of oral history. Some remedies that have been suggested are:

- 1 Interviewers should explore individual and local experiences.
- 2 It is important to explore areas generally closed to historical investigation—for example domestic arrangements, social relationships at work, and informal community support networks.
- 3 Before collecting oral evidence a detailed and systematic survey of the available literature should be made. This will help to structure questions so that the testimony gathered would elaborate on and fill in the gaps left by other sources. These three suggestions may also help to avoid the problem of oral testimony repeating evidence available elsewhere.
- 4 Where an attempt is being made to reconstruct the course of major events in the past, it is important to move beyond general descriptions and to try and get a more detailed picture of the complex nature of people's participation in specific events. This can be done by focussing on personal experiences, individual motives, social pressures and interviewing a wide range of people who participated in the event.
- 5 Where it is possible it is important to do groups of interviews to cross check the evidence for reliability.
- 6 Distortions and inaccuracies should all be investigated as possible indicators of people's values and ways of coping with past experiences.
- 7 If an interview does not yield detailed information it is worth conducting a second follow-up interview if the informant agrees.

### Thematic interviews

The realisation of the shortcomings of the archival interviews prompted the staff of the SAIRR to collect evidence around specific themes from groups of people who participated in the same events and who did the same kind of work. At the same time the desire to present oral testimony in a popular form prompted the SAIRR project to interview groups of people sharing common experiences. This opened the possibility of recording the perceptions of ordinary (rank and file) people.

Three sets of interviews were done. The first of these investigated the campaign against the imposition of passes on black women in the area of Zeerust in the

1950s. The second project set out to explore the changing experience of dockers at Durban harbour as well as to record the history of resistance against low wages and poor working conditions. The third project focused on the living and working conditions of Indian hawkers in Johannesburg.

Ordinary people still have limited access to the means that would allow them to produce their own history. At the very least they were able to tell their history through the interviews, with the possibility of making this available to other people. Behind the decision to publish the evidence in booklets lay the belief that "... when they are read ... many people are highly appreciative of the fact that for once common experience is given the dignity and significance which it deserves."<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless the three sets of interviews have some serious problems and shortcomings. Some of these relate directly to the South African situation. The others reflect methodological weaknesses and technical problems. It is not possible to discuss each of these projects in detail. The following discussion focuses on one specific problem.

In two of the projects (Zeerust campaign and Durban dockers) the interviews were conducted in the vernacular through interpreters.

As has been argued oral sources are inevitably a result of the interaction between researcher and informant. This relationship is broken if one is forced to use other people as interviewers. While this may appear to be a problem which relates specifically to situations where a range of different languages are spoken (eg South Africa) it does have broader implications. It raises the difficulty of members of different class and racial backgrounds interviewing people from the popular classes. There are two aspects to this difficulty. The first relates to the inequality which may be present in the interview situation. This has been discussed above. The second aspect relates to the fact that a lack of common experiences between interviewee and interviewer may result in the interviewer being unable to formulate questions pertinent to the informant's lived experience. This is illustrated by the following account:

When a particular group of people say 'house', 'home', 'dinner', 'tea' or 'supper' the general term contains a specific sense: homes/houses of a particular kind, dinners, teas, suppers at certain times of day and with expected sorts of food and drink. These general terms, in other words involve specific expectations. To put it another way, the general terms derive their meanings from the social context in which they are used; this is how people of the same group understand one another and why outsiders often find it difficult.<sup>11</sup>





Thus the lack of shared experience can affect the interview and resulting testimony.

A second major difficulty is raised by the translation of the transcripts of interviews. Portelli points out the problem of transcribing interviews. The unique impact to the voice — its shifts in emphasis, its silences and all that this conveys is virtually lost in transcription. These problems are magnified by the process of translation. Dialect and accent as possible indicators of people's social position are extremely difficult to capture in the translated form. Literal translation is clumsy and often difficult to understand. A good translation involves restructuring and the intervention of a third party. Metaphor and proverb which can convey collective memory are inevitably lost. Portelli sums this up: "The greater or lesser presence of formalised materials (proverbs, songs, stereo-types) can be witness to a greater or lesser presence of the collective viewpoint within the narrator's tale."<sup>12</sup> The original evidence is filtered through a process which extinguishes emotional expression. Nicknames given to places, working implements, machines or people by a group of people in similar situations are often lost. What goes with them are the indicators of collective ways of dealing with their experiences.

A third difficulty arising in the interview situation is that translation or interpretation can result in the researcher missing the opportunity for follow up questioning. It would seem that where possible it is best for the researcher to be present at the interview where both questions and responses are closely translated. While this might be disruptive, it has the advantage of allowing the researcher to be more in touch with the situation and to respond to the evidence more effectively. This method was successfully used when interviewing Durban dockers. The workers were sensitive to the problem of interpretation because of the tradition of interpretation in their trade union meetings. They were patient and seldom lost their train of thought and enthusiasm. It is however very important in this situation for the translator to be well informed on the area of investigation and essential that he/she have a respect for people's testimony.

The thematic interviews share with the archival interviews two major problems. Large parts of the interviews are too general and do not explore the areas of personal and local experience. Secondly the meaning behind anecdotes was not investigated. Many of the anecdotes served as lively illustrations in the publications but why people remembered certain events and stories, and why they remember them in the ways that they do remain unexplored.

## Popularising oral testimony

In all three projects the interviews were edited and prepared for publication by the researchers/historians with of course the consent of the informants. There was, therefore, a substantial and conscious intervention by the researchers/editors in either constructing the narrative and/or commenting on and analysing events. Portelli argues that "Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history it is clear that the class does not speak in the abstract, but speaks to the historian and with the historian."<sup>13</sup> This applies to the popularised form as well. Oral history can be presented in different forms. The degree to which the historian intervenes depends on the form. For example while the informants do speak for themselves in the publication on Durban dockers, they also speak through the researcher/historian insofar as she has constructed the narrative. Many local and oral history projects encourage informants to write their own histories.<sup>14</sup> This allows people to speak for themselves in a much more real sense. Even here, however, the input of the researcher or interviewer affects the form of the publications. This is especially the case where participants in these projects have only basic levels of literacy. A member of the Hackney Adult Education Centre (London) who uses oral history in adult education classes throws some light on this problem. She tells of a group of black people who felt that their oral testimony contained too many grammatical errors to be published in an unedited form and insisted that she correct the 'errors'.

On the one hand some oral historians maintain a (pure) position that oral testimony should in no way be corrected or edited. In academic publications it is obviously desirable and possible to use oral evidence in an unedited form. The above example shows this is not so easy with popular publications. The issue here becomes not whether to edit but how to do this without destroying the integrity and authenticity of the oral testimony. A range of methods can and have been developed in local history groups to do this. These cannot be discussed here in detail and it must suffice to point out that the most common principle is that correction must be done collectively with the active participation of the informants.

A community based local history project in England, the Peckham People's History Group offers a good example of how this kind of collective work is conducted. The group is an editorial group open to anyone in the community. It edits and publishes the contributions of members of the community. In this situation the informants themselves decide on corrections and additions, on the form of the final product. After typesetting they do the proofreading, design and pasting-up. In this way the production process is demystified and these people control the process of their own work. As a result the members involved have come to "agree on a basic common position: the working class has won

improvements in material conditions, but these have not been accompanied by gains in the struggle to control our own lives. We see our books as part of this struggle."<sup>15</sup> This is not an isolated experience in English local history projects. Ken Worpole argues that "Through active membership of . . . local history projects, many people have gained important experiences in being producers and organisers of cultural material production."<sup>16</sup>

### **Some possibilities for community-based oral history in South Africa<sup>17</sup>**

The repressive nature of the South African state and local authorities makes the location of oral history in the community both important and extremely difficult. Also the necessary structures — community centres, halls, local museums, adult education centres and support from local authorities — are only available to privileged groups in South African society. However, it is not an impossible task to organise community-based oral history. Increasing militancy and growing levels of organisation amongst the dominated people in South Africa provides a ready ground for oral and local history work.

The use of oral evidence is not new in South Africa. A number of organisations have for some time been engaged in the collection of oral testimony. Also, many academic historians have used oral sources in their work. This research often focuses on local and regional issues, domestic life, popular culture, the place of individual experience in historical process, informal and spontaneous forms of resistance, and other subjects which are characteristic of people's history. Some of these academics have used their resources at the university to provide support for groups in trade unions and community organisations wanting to collect oral and local history.

Where organisational support structures exist, the task of developing the field of oral history is easier. For example, the oral history project on Durban dockers had the support of the trade union to which the informants belong. Using the organisational resources of the trade union meant that meetings that are open to union members could be organised where both the oral testimony and background material could be discussed. Workers could then have the opportunity to shape the final form in which material was presented. There is a strong possibility that such discussions would yield fresh evidence, as well as give the workers more control over their own material.

Literacy organisations offer another form of organisation which could provide backing for the development of oral history. In South Africa there are a number of adult education and adult literacy organisations. They generally work through small groups within communities or in trade unions which meet with the co-ordinator once or twice a week. The advantage here is having already

established groups that are accustomed to working together intensely and collectively. With their participation and consent, their testimony contributed in a class situation, could be used as a basis for the production of reading and educational materials.<sup>18</sup>

It would be more difficult to introduce oral history into schools which are controlled by the state and follow a state-determined syllabus. However progressive teacher and student organisations could use oral history to do community and family histories. In this way students could acquire skills at the same time as collecting important historical evidence. This kind of work also helps to break down the boundaries between the professional historian and the student. As important however, is the fact that this kind of work opens the way for closer contact between the generations — between parents and children. As Worpole says: "That break through in which it is possible for young people to begin to see their own parents as historical figure is critically important . . ."<sup>19</sup> That this kind of parent — youth solidarity is important is shown by attempts by the state to divide parents from students in current student resistance to education policy in South Africa.

Where organisational structures do not exist the task of setting up oral history projects is more difficult. Without the support and protection of established organisational structures, state harassment and the lack of necessary community structures are more menacing. In addition, the day-to-day reality of people's lives makes setting up groups difficult. Long working hours and long distances travelled to work leave people with very little leisure time. This often results in fluctuating attendance and participation at meetings.

Despite these problems, groups can be established and there are many topics which these groups could work on by using collective oral history methods. For example the changing conditions of domestic work in city or even a suburb of a city could be explored. The conditions of work and the quality of life of domestic workers is a relatively unexplored field in South Africa. In this instance oral history could yield valuable information as well as serve as a focus for contact with domestic workers to help pinpoint their problems.

Similarly local history groups could be established to investigate social relationships in black townships. The history of political resistance and of political organisation can systematically be documented through oral history. For example the archival interviews collected by the SAIRR project which focused on political resistance could have been confined to looking at resistance in one area, or the history of one branch of an organisation such as the ANC. This would provide the possibility of building up a detailed picture of resistance in one locality.



Oral history in South Africa can be used with a much more immediate political purpose. One concrete example of this has been with people on strike or people who have been retrenched. Publishing the testimony of workers on strike may help to publicise their struggle as well as to gain support for it. At the same time it can be used as a focus for keeping the workers together in a period of stress. Communities under threat of removal offer another example. Under threat of removal many communities develop a strong sense of their history, and their right to the land. Recording the history of these communities and making it widely available may help to justify their claims to the land.

Some of these ideas are not new. They draw on the work that has already been done by individuals and organisations in this field. Perhaps this paper will contribute in a small way to South Africa's oral history movement.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 This article is based on a paper which evaluates in detail the oral history project of The South African Institute of Race Relations (1982-1984). The writer was a member of this project and the paper is based on her experience there as well as insights gained from the oral history course at Essex University and a brief visit to some local and oral history projects in England, Scotland and Wales. Some of the ideas in the sections dealing specifically with the SAIRR project are based on a previous paper: 'A report of the South African Institute of Race Relations Oral History Project' Manson; Cachalia and Sideris, 1984. A revised version of this can be referred to in *Social Dynamics* Vol. 11 no2, Dec. 1985.
- 2 Thompson, P. 1978: *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford University Press, Ch.4.
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- 6 *Ibid.*, p211.
- 7 Thompson, E.P. 1981: 'The Politics of Theory' in R Samuel (ed), *People's History and Socialist Theory*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, p406.
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- 9 Morley, D and Worpole, K. 1982: (ed) *Republic of Letters: Working class writing and local publishing*. Comedia. p94.
- 10 *Ibid.* p94.
- 11 *Ibid.* p106.
- 12 Portelli, A. 1981: 'The peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal* no 12 p99.
- 13 Portelli, A. 1981: *op cit*. p100.
- 14 Some of the better known examples in England are the Centreprise Project, Hackney People's Autobiography and Peckham People's History Project; in South Africa the Ravan Press Workers Series.

- 15 Gray, R. 1984: "History is what you want to say . . . publishing people's history", *Oral History Journal*, vol 12, no2.
- 16 Worpole, K. 1981: "A Ghostly Pavement: The Political Implications of local Working-Class History." in R Samuel (ed) *op cit*, p31.
- 17 Some of the ideas in this section are based on the kind of work local history projects visited in the UK are doing. Apart from those mentioned in the body the following groups were visited: Island History Project (London), London History Workshop Centre (London), South Wales Miners Library (Swansea), Manchester Studies (Manchester), Age Concern Oral History Project (Ayr).
- 18 See L Callinicos' paper in this edition.
- 19 Worpole, K. 1981, *op cit*, p33.
- 20 See Linda Cooper's work in this issue.

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