
Lessons from World War II and the Holocaust: What can be Done through Oral History to Save the World Heritage of Memory in Africa?

Laila Hussein Moustafa

University of Illinois at Urbana -Champaign, Illinois, USA

lhousesi@illinois.edu



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Abstract:

The recent conflicts in Timbuktu, Egypt, Libya and other countries in Africa demonstrate that its cultural heritage as contained in libraries and archives is routinely targeted for destruction and remains vulnerable throughout times of strife. To complicate the problem, much of Africa's recorded history is the production of Western scholars or is represented by "official" government records. As a result, much of Africa's recorded history is compromised, inaccurate, or an insufficient reflection of the continent's rich history and culture. The challenges faced by many African countries to preserve their cultural heritage, then, exceed the mere preservation of artifacts and records. They must also seek out, elicit and record the recollections and experiences of ordinary people. In fact, the people's collective memory is a valuable, yet untapped, resource for historians and is an option for preserving African cultural heritage. Perhaps the most famous and powerful leveraging of such oral histories has been demonstrated by the Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and the scholars and archivists who recorded their stories. This collaboration between storyteller and archivists, journalists, scholars and librarians is exemplified by Dr. Sidney Bolkosky, Professor of History and Director of the Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Greenspan's seminal 1998 work On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony is now in a second, expanded edition; see also the work of filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who made the Holocaust documentary Shoah. Such work with oral histories inscribes personal testimony into the historical record, salvaging these narratives from obscurity and bearing witness to events otherwise lost to the competing, obscurantist narratives of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism. Such a collaboration, along with additional efforts by a wide variety of private citizens and international organizations, also served to preserve both the personal narratives and material culture of Europe during World War II, and is likewise instructive for African libraries and archives seeking to preserve their material and oral cultural history. This paper will discuss the value of oral history as a bulwark in the preservation of African cultural heritage against the physical destruction of war and other political unrest, and the attendant importance of collaboration between librarians, archivists, international organizations and local residents to document, preserve and protect African culture in its broadest sense, including lives lived, local history and genealogical traditions.

Keywords: Oral history -- Holocaust and World War II – African conflicts and genocides – African history – African genealogy.

“Old people may be seen as libraries in their own right,
and their unwritten stories need to be preserved for the future”¹

Background: The Oral History of the Jewish Holocaust of World War II

In 1946 Dr. David P. Boder of the Illinois Institute of Technology traveled to Europe to record the memories of survivors of the Jewish Holocaust of World War II.² As a psychologist, he wanted to understand the impact of intensive suffering on personality. But more important for our purposes, Boder also wanted to preserve an “authentic record of wartime suffering” to educate the American public about the fate of the victims of the ghettos and camps, and to draw attention to the need to bring the refugees to America. In the immediate postwar period, little was known about the Holocaust, and Boder’s work stressed the importance of recording the survivors’ experiences in their own voices, not only to memorialize, but to bear witness - to testify. According to “Voices of the Holocaust”, the Illinois Institute of Technology webpage devoted to Boder’s work, this pioneering investigator would begin his interviews by impressing upon his subjects the vital importance of their stories as a form of testimony: “We know very little in America about *the things that happened to you* people who were in concentration camps,” he would tell them. Here Boder’s emphasis on “the things that happened” in the camps points to oral narrative’s power to constitute an historical record from first-hand experience.

“Voices of the Holocaust” includes valuable information about Boder’s scope and methodology that is instructive to contemporary librarians and archivists. Over three months Boder recorded 90 hours of first-hand testimony of survivors of the Holocaust. But he did not limit his interviews to Jews or to camp survivors. He also interviewed 21 non-Jewish survivors, perpetrators and local Germans who resided near the concentration camps. Boder also highlighted the experiences of children and young adults through interviews with the residents of an orphanage who were transferred from Poland to France. He transcribed the interviews and in 1949 published them in a volume whose title, *I Did not Interview the Dead*, alludes simultaneously to the broad scope of his project, and the power of violence and war to silence their victims and erase the evidence of their crimes.

The Illinois Institute of Technology oral history project based on Boder’s pioneering work is only one of many that have recorded the history of the Holocaust. The collaboration between storyteller and archivists, journalists, scholars and librarians in this field is also exemplified by Dr. Sidney Bolkosky, Professor of History and Director of the Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Greenspan’s seminal 1998 work *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* is now in a second, expanded edition; see also the work of filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who made the Holocaust documentary Shoah.

¹ Barbara Allen Bogart and William L. Montell. *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*. Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1981, p. 6.

² Boder’s work is available online through “Voices of the Holocaust”, the website of a project of the Paul Galvin Library of the Illinois Institute of Technology that provides a permanent digital archive of transcribed and translated oral testimony of Holocaust survivors. See http://voices.iit.edu/david_boder . The citations which follow were retrieved on May 25, 2015.

Such work with oral histories of the World War II Jewish Holocaust inscribes personal testimony into the historical record, salvaging these narratives from obscurity and bearing witness to events otherwise lost to the competing, obscurantist narratives of such forces as nationalism, imperialism and colonialism.

What Constitutes Oral History?

In her book *Recording Oral History*, Valerie Yow establishes the role of the interviewer as a kind of “framer” of the topic, who inspires the subject to begin to narrate what he or she remembers.³ In this sense, the interviewer who elicits and the archivists who catalogue and preserve this “personal testimony delivered in oral form.” collaborate in the production of oral history.⁴

Donald Ritchie also sees oral history as collaborative, and, in dividing it into a series of steps, joins together the efforts of witness, interviewer and archivist.⁵ In his book *Doing Oral History*, he declares: “An oral history interview consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format”. First the interview takes place, and then it must be transcribed and indexed. In addition to establishing the importance of the roles of transcriber and archivist, Ritchie legitimizes oral history interviews as primary sources for the use of researchers.⁶

According to Jan Vansina in *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, oral history does more than chronicle historical events. Rather, it includes poems, songs, myths, ancient proverbs, customs and more.⁷ Here one must also include recounted family histories and genealogies as an important oral historical resource. Indeed, oral history can preserve almost any aspect of human cultural expression, and arises naturally from the dynamics of a culture. As a flexible and infinitely portable and transmittable form, oral tradition is in fact an ideal medium for cultural preservation in the physically precarious conditions of war or social unrest.

Oral History within the Fields of Library and Archival Science

In 1948, Columbia University in New York funded within its library an oral history research office and archive, now the Columbia Center for Oral History, one of the first and most important such programs in the United States. The program was not much supported because of the pervasive idea that oral history rested on a potentially faulty source: memory. By the 1960s and 1970s, oral history had become more extensively used as method to preserve the past. The Oral History Association (OHA) was established in the United States in 1967, and focused on the archiving of oral history to build library collections, rather than on the library’s traditional ways of purchasing books. In short, by the late sixties, librarians and

³ Valerie Raleigh Yow. *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. 2nd ed. Walnut Creek, Lanham, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield (AltaMira Press), 2005, pp. 3-4.

⁴ *Loc. cit.*

⁵ Donald A. Ritchie. *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*. 2nd ed.: New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 20.

⁷ Jan Vansina. *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*. Translated by H. M. Wright from the 1961 French original *De la tradition orale*. 1st English ed. was published Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1965; 2nd revised paperback ed. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009.

archivists were beginning to play an active role in the legitimization of oral histories, which they championed as public documents that should be accessible to everyone.⁸

In 1968, Martha Zachert in her article “The Implications of Oral History for Librarians” addressed the new responsibilities and challenges facing librarians with this new type of material. The article examined the changing role and future of oral history and was the first to show how librarians and archivists can benefit from it.⁹ While oral history literature continued to examine the archivist’s role in oral history, archivists and librarians were not joining this important discussion. Zachert argued that oral history literature as a primary source is an important way of recording a people’s history, and librarians and archivists should work with oral historians and collaborate with each other in the preservation of oral traditions and culture. I note that this is especially true in Africa, as a means of preserving Africa’s local and family history, culture and genealogy.

Paul Thompson in *The Voice of the Past* had argued that the practice of oral history interviews offered a new way of “doing history from the bottom up”, suggesting that such interviews give power to the people to tell their story, and take the power to tell the story away from the traditional power structure of a society.¹⁰ In this vein, the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) encouraged historians to work on more oral history projects in order to cover long-neglected topics such as the history of ethnic groups, minorities, and women. These changes in the field of oral history did indeed motivate archivists and librarians to work together with historians to try to understand and give voice to individuals and cultures who do not have a written record.

The 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in the number of publications about oral history in the archives. These had titles such as “Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives” and *Archives, Oral History and Oral Tradition*.¹¹ Library science publications also examined oral history as a resource, the value of the oral history interview, and the impact and appropriateness of archivists or librarians themselves creating such interviews.¹²

The 1990s witnessed a decline in the publications on oral history. However, a few articles by librarians did address the issue of digital management of oral histories. Some articles presented oral history projects in the United States and other countries or in non-academic institutions.

On the whole, however, there is still a dearth of professional publications by librarians on oral history in general and on the African oral history in particular. This gap needs to be addressed. The rest of my paper will therefore focus on the vital role of librarians and archivists in the creation of more oral history projects in Africa.

⁸ Ellen D. Swain. “Oral History in the Archives: Its Documentary Role in the Twenty-First Century”. *The American Archivist*. Vol. 66, No 1 (Spring – Summer, 2003), p. 139.

⁹ Martha Jane Koontz Zachert.. "Implications Of Oral History For Librarians." *College & Research Libraries* 29.(1968), pp. 101-103, viewed in *Library & Information Science Source* on the Internet, May 30, 2015.

¹⁰ Quoted in Ellen Swain, “Oral History in the Archives”, p 141.

¹¹ James Fogerty, “Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives,” *The American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983), pp. 148-157; William W. Moss and Peter G. Maikana, *Archives, Oral History and Oral Tradition: A RAMP Study*, Paris: Unesco, 1986 (Records and Archives Management Programme, PGI-86/WS/2).

¹² Swain, p. 142.

Oral History in Africa

The European study of African oral history can be said to have begun in the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to a group of scholars who around 1828 had become interested in learning and studying African languages in order to aid the evangelization of Africa.¹³ But African oral histories were not treated seriously until the end of the century, when a collection of oral Angolan folk-tales made by a Swiss missionary and commercial agent¹⁴ proved that many myths and incidents presented in African narratives were similar to those recorded in European history, and many Europeans expressed surprise that Africans could produce works of such complexity of feeling.¹⁵ This compilation started the push to study the unwritten oral literature of the African. Later anthropologists started to focus on collecting a broader range of oral materials, in order to include first-hand accounts of customs by natives in their studies of African societies. By the end of 1950s and the early 1960s, an increasing interest in African oral history was noticeable, perhaps because narrative as a tool can give voice to the marginalized. In fact, the field of African Studies in academia arose only after many African countries began to seek independence from their colonial masters in the decades after World War II.¹⁶

Why do we still need to record oral history in Africa today? Much of African history, whether due to Western ethnocentrism, political abuse, or simple short-sightedness, has not been credited or exactly recorded. Many historians have limited their study of the continent's written records to "official" documents produced by governments. Finally, Africa's material and written cultural heritage, particularly that contained in libraries and archives, is routinely targeted for destruction and remains vulnerable throughout times of conflict, as demonstrated most recently in Timbuktu, Egypt, and Libya. As a result, oral history is an essential resource in the creation and preservation of a body of authentic African knowledge in the face of the destructive power of war, political abuse and time. Left unrecorded, this valuable resource, and its power to preserve African culture, will be lost forever.

The Rwanda Oral History Project

It is instructive to study the case of a major African oral history project, the collection of the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, hosted by the library of the University of Texas at Austin. In tandem with Boder's earlier Jewish Holocaust memories project, this contemporary African project attests to the importance of oral narrative as a form of historical testimony, and proposes its applicability to the preservation of human rights, culture and family records by librarians, activists and historians.¹⁷

The Rwanda oral history project began in 1994, and "was conducted after the genocide event. The project has 68 videos, 271 audio transcripts, 867 photographs, 19 publication titles, and 27 archival documents in English, French, and Kinyarwanda." The project is maintained

¹³ Ruth Finnegan. *Oral Literature in Africa*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012 (World Oral Literature Series, 1), p. 32.

¹⁴ Héli Chatelain, ed. *Folk-tales of Angola: Fifty Tales, with Ki-Mbundu Text, Literal English Translation, Introduction and Notes*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, London: David Nutt, Leipzig: K. F. Koehler's Antiquarium, 1894 (Memoir of the American Folklore Society, 1)

¹⁵ Finnegan, p.37.

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ "Genocide Archive of Rwanda Collection: Oral History Project created by the Texas Archival Resources Online at the University of Texas at Austin". See <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/hrdi/00004/hrdi-00004.html> . The citations which follow were retrieved on May 24, 2015.

online as part of the University of Texas at Austin Human Rights Documentation. Through a series of case studies of past genocides, the creators seek to improve the chances of preventing future genocide and other mass atrocities. In particular, “by examining the role of the international community in past incidents of genocide and violence.... the oral history project seeks to shape the views of a new generation of policymakers both within the United States and around the world.”

Like Boder’s Holocaust oral history project, the Rwandan genocide project includes the words and the voices of people who experienced the genocide first-hand. Also like Boder’s project, it includes a broad range of eyewitnesses: both the victims and the perpetrators, the peacekeepers, diplomats and bystanders, as well as government officials, scholars and journalists.

The project incorporates multi-media records of the events of the Rwandan genocide, including audio recordings of local radio and television broadcasts disseminating hate propaganda against Tutsis and moderate Hutus, as well as video documentation of the experiences of survivors, rescuers and perpetrators during and after the conflict. The project is indexed by subject headings that include place names, and the contents of its boxes of materials are described folder by folder. The 271 audio clips are available online along with their transcripts. The photographs cover a thirty year span from 1981 to 2010; many of them were scanned, while others were originally digital. While the project in Texas has an online version and a copy at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center in Rwanda, not all of its materials are online, either because they have not been catalogued or they do not have a high enough resolution to be archived online.

Challenges

Today, it is still a challenge for librarians to find a book produced in Africa, or African government publications, let alone African local or family histories or genealogies. Today, only a few African countries have a national archive, and many of these were produced by a colonial administration and reside outside the continent.¹⁸ Furthermore, Africa’s complicated politics have given rise to gaps in its historical record. For example, Tina Sideris has argued that the history of the South African people has not been accurately recorded for a number of reasons. In some cases historical investigation has been obstructed by censorship and the removal of documents. In another case, trade union and political organization archives were destroyed or confiscated by political opponents.¹⁹

The condition of African historical records constitutes a state of emergency, not only for Africa’s material culture, but also for its personal and political narratives. Librarians, researchers, and archivists need to focus on the importance of preserving the African countries’ historical record, not only through the creation and protection of archives, but also through the creation of oral history projects that preserve the memories of their people and secure their history from being lost through time.

¹⁸ Francis T. Kirkwood, “Colonial Knowledge Pathways back to the European Capitals and How to Use Them to Recover the History of African Knowledge in the Early 20th Century”, IFLA World Library and Information Congress 2009 (Milan), session 95 (Access to Information Network Africa), August 23, 2009, available online at <http://conference.ifla.org/past-wlic/2009/95-kirkwood-en.pdf>.

¹⁹ Tina Sideris. “Recording Living Memory in South Africa”. *Critical Arts: South-North Cultural and Media Studies*, v.4. no. 2 (1986), pp. 41- 53.

Recommendations

1. Librarians in Africa should expand their role beyond purchasing and preserving materials to take an active role in the creation of materials.
2. Librarians in Africa must develop their skills as interviewers for the preservation of African oral history and educate themselves about relevant issues of copyright law and intellectual property.
3. Librarians in Africa need to advocate for a national or continental depository space for all oral history projects created by scholars, journalists, or librarians.
4. Librarians in Africa should work to preserve a wide range of oral cultural productions including poetry, music, ritual, family narrative and genealogy, so as to create a rich and multi-faceted *primary source* that stands as a testament to lived experience and can even perhaps prevail as a form of resistance against the power of competing political narratives that threaten to erase it.

Conclusion

The past seventy years have witnessed the transition of oral history from marginalization as a social experiment or normalization as mere “storytelling” to acceptance as a legitimate and valuable component of the historical record. Today oral history is a resource used by doctors, lawyers, historians, librarians, and genealogists. As a form of testimony, oral history shifts the production of history from the political to the social realm, investing the victims of genocide, violence and political oppression with the agency to reconstruct, bear witness to, and memorialize their experience. In a broader sense, oral history also preserves these narratives as part of the collective experience that constitutes a nation’s cultural heritage. As Bogart and Montell point out, a single experience can in many ways be representative: “Oral history can serve as a microcosm of a nation’s history.”²⁰

Both the Holocaust project and the Rwandan Genocide project point to the immense value of recording and preserving individual experience for subsequent generations. However, collaboration between librarians, historians, and scholars from other disciplines, including genealogists, is vitally important to the preservation and continued production of oral history projects.

African oral history has some of its deepest roots in Northern Africa, and the oral accounts of medieval African states, society and antecedents recorded by Islamic and Arabic scholars in such histories as the *Tarikh al-Fattash* and the *Tarikh al-Sudan*²¹ suggest that its relevance to contemporary libraries and archives may represent a return to these roots as much as an innovation.

Today, librarians in Africa need to recognize the value of oral history as an important component in the preservation of African history and genealogy, and, as well, their essential role in recording it. In order to undertake oral history projects like Boder’s “Voices of the

²⁰ Barbara Allen Bogart and William L. Montell. *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research*. Nashville, Tennessee: American Association for State and Local History, 1981, p. 4.

²¹ *Tarikh al-Fattash* (the *History of al-Fattash*), from Timbuktu, is a West African Arabic manuscript chronicle of the medieval Songhay Empire, written down by Mahmoud Qati or maybe his grandson Ibn al-Mukhtar in the 17th century. *Tarikh al-Sudan* (the *History of Sudan*) is the other main Arabic manuscript history of medieval northern Africa, written by Abd al-Sadi in 1655.

Holocaust” at the Illinois Institute of Technology or the Kigali Rwandan Genocide Memorial Documentation at the University of Texas at Austin, one must learn about the community whose traditions are to be preserved, get to know its members as persons as well as interview subjects, and develop the skills to gather, record and archive the wide array of oral history materials that constitute their memory of its complex and rich cultural history.