

ORAL HISTORY & HISTORICAL RESEARCH IN SA: SOME THEORETICAL ISSUES

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Purpose

- ▶ Discuss the role of oral history in the rewriting of South African history.
 - ▶ The position of oral history in the school curriculum and why it is emphasized.
 - ▶ A critical appraisal of oral history: Some theoretical questions.
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Key Terms

- ▶ Oral History: the method that uses oral traditions and/or oral testimony as a form of historical evidence. Oral histories are usually gathered by historians/researchers through interviews, often using a tape recorder.
 - ▶ Oral Testimony: eyewitness or first-hand account of an event or situation which occurred during the lifetime of the person interviewed; hearsay or reminiscences about contemporary events – e.g. life histories.
 - ▶ Oral Traditions: stories or narratives which have been transmitted by word of mouth beyond the generation that gave rise to them; these accounts are no longer contemporary – e.g. folktales, epics, genealogies, praise songs, etc.
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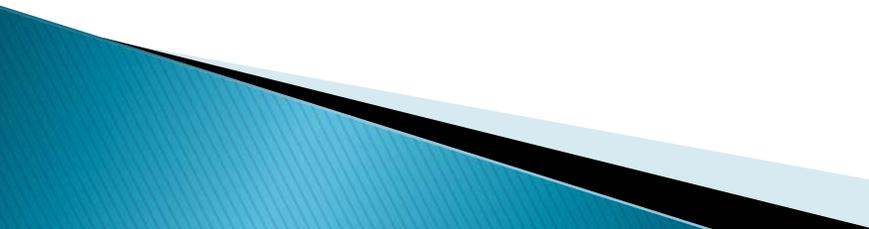
Key sources of evidence on SA history, esp. precolonial Africans

- ▶ Archaeological evidence: remains of societies (housing, graves, rubbish dumps, etc. These tell a good deal about the broad way in which people lived but cannot tell us much about the specific values & processes that existed
- ▶ Accounts of literate observers: White traders, explorers, hunters, missionaries & colonial officials wrote down accounts of African societies. But outsiders with biases and cultural blinkers; limited language capacity; limited range of informants
- ▶ Commissions of inquiry: Often headed by white judges weighing up evidence of experts. But narrow range of informants, biases, etc.
- ▶ Anthropological evidence: ethnographies of customs and practices of particular 'tribes'. But normative accounts; assumption that African societies had remained unchanged over long periods.
- ▶ Oral traditions: stories about the past handed from generation to generation. But these change with every telling & often heavily focused on the lives and activities of great men – kings & chiefs and to have little to say about the more everyday aspects of societies.

Why Oral History?

- ▶ Marginalised histories: Prior to 1994 South African history was written from the point of view of the ruling white elites, e.g. 1652 as the beginning of SA history; focus on white men's activities in SA, etc.
- ▶ African voices were not adequately captured in official sources. Even where such perspectives existed, they were marginalised or simply suppressed, e.g. mining and metallurgy and involvement in international trade in precolonial societies (Mapungubwe, Phalaborwa, etc.).
- ▶ Africans were largely oral societies: no writing and hence little or no written records of their activities and accomplishments.
- ▶ But African societies used memory to store valuable historical information.
- ▶ Growing emphasis on oral history in schools and broader society based on a genuine effort to recover our silenced voices (Oral history = LO in the school curriculum).

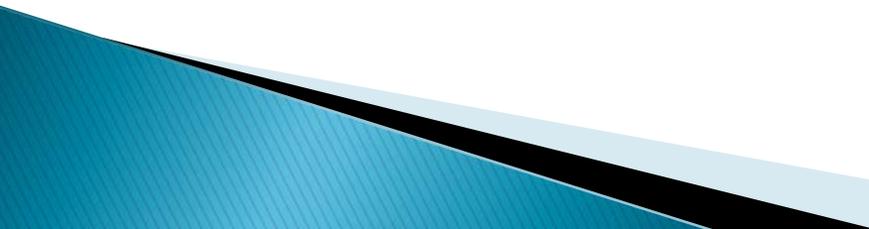
Why Oral History? (Cont.)

- ▶ The universality of oral history: use of oral history not peculiar to Africa. Jules Michelet, leading historian of mid-19th century France, based his History of the French Revolution on his memory, the oral accounts he collected, and written documents (Paul Thompson).
 - ▶ Why? Michelet's intention's was to counterbalance the evidence of official documents with the political judgments of popular oral tradition. This was not peculiar.
 - ▶ It was only recently that oral evidence ceased to be taken seriously, until it was placed on the agenda of African scholarship within the context of decolonization.
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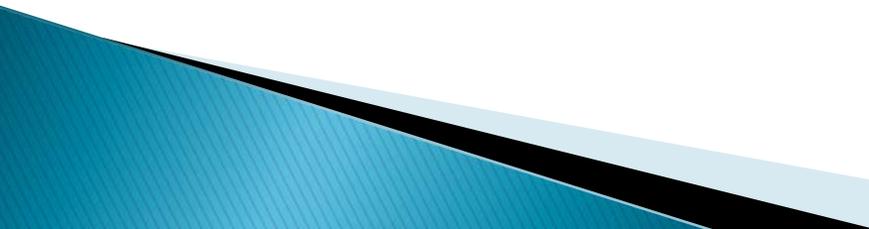
History of Oral History Scholarship in SA

- ▶ Oral history has a much longer history – colonial officials, missionaries and literate Africans collected oral testimonies & oral traditions from the 19th century (Ref. Isabel Hofmeyr).
- ▶ But oral history research only began to flourish from the late 1970s – the birth of radical historiography in the Wits History Workshop.
- ▶ ‘Social history’ – ‘history from below’; the ‘bottom-up’ versus ‘top-down’ approach.
- ▶ Rural history but also urban African histories – OH used to develop insights on rural societies but also to deepen understanding of urban communities and the fabric of their social, economic and cultural life.

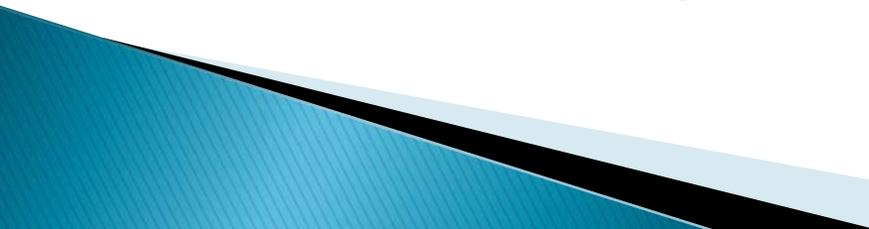
Value of Oral History

- ▶ Captures the voices of ‘ordinary people’ and retrieves hidden histories (rural societies). It has some democratizing potential.
 - ▶ Provides insights into the construction of identity.
 - ▶ Local specificity.
 - ▶ Formation of popular historical consciousness.
 - ▶ Insights into the everyday.
 - ▶ Serves as an antidote/corrective to the biases and distortions in the official archives & other sources.
 - ▶ Helps open up new areas of inquiry.
 - ▶ Oral interview as a means of discovering written documents and visual archives which would have otherwise remained obscured.
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Limitations of Oral History

- ▶ Interviewer–interviewee relationship – power relations
 - ▶ Unreliability of memory and remembering; selectivity and silencing of traumatic and dehumanizing experiences
 - ▶ Memory often triggered by interest
 - ▶ Language barrier, esp. if the researcher is a ‘cultural outsider’
 - ▶ Translation
 - ▶ Manipulation of oral sources
 - ▶ Deliberate distortion of facts
 - ▶ Problem of chronology
 - ▶ Silences or refusal to discuss certain topics, e.g. intimacy, emotions, etc.
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How to deal with some of the limitations of Oral History

- ▶ Fallibility of memory: verify sources; identify contradictions and analyze them (not peculiar to OH).
 - ▶ Problem of bias or distortion: Apply the same standards to judge the reliability of oral evidence as conventional historians do to documentary sources, i.e. check for reliability of the source, cross-check the informant's recollection against other oral accounts and archival sources. Never rely on an individual testimony.
 - ▶ Problem of motive: Ask yourself questions about the informant's identity and their agendas (both public and hidden) in giving their accounts.
 - ▶ Probe the informant's point of view of the event/incident being described and how this has affected the way in which s/he is describing it.
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Value of Oral History (Cont.)

- ▶ John Tosh: 'Oral history allows the voice of ordinary people to be heard alongside the careful marshalling of social facts in the written record... What oral history also uniquely conveys is the essential connectedness of aspects of daily life which the historian otherwise tends to know of as discrete social facts... Oral history, in short, tries to give social history a human face.'
- ▶ Tosh: '[Oral histories] are verbal materials, and they share many of the strengths and weaknesses of written sources – the wealth of detail and nuance of meaning, as well as the distortions of cultural bias and political calculation... they have the further attraction of affording a unique insight into the formation of popular historical consciousness – something which should be of abiding interest to all historians.'

Conclusion: Value of Oral History

- ▶ Despite some weaknesses, oral history has a valuable contribution to make in the documentation and preservation of the history and heritage of the country in general, and in Mpumalanga in particular.
 - ▶ Oral testimonies and oral traditions should be seen as key BUT not exclusive sources in the project of documenting our history and heritage.
 - ▶ Oral history is not a panacea for addressing historical distortions and exclusion of African voices, but can play a pivotal role in reclaiming and preserving our heritage.
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