

Chapter 4

Reconnecting the Past Through Oral History: An Effort in Preserving Malaysians' Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract Malaysian are among the societies in the world who started late in documenting their history. Most stories and cultural heritage were commonly shared orally from one generation to another. Hence, the lack of original historical resources has been a major problem in reconstructing Malaysian history. Without oral history being recorded and written, and with the loss of the elders who were willing to preserve and pass along this history, cultural memories began to wither, along with many of the colorful cultures and heritage. Malaysia, known as a melting pot of race and culture, has a society who had long discovered their culture and heritage through oral history as a part of their rich historical heritage. In view of that, there is a need of encouragement and effort on historical research and oral history writing for the continued preservation and appreciation of oral history among its people. This paper provides an overview on the importance of oral history in preserving the valuable oral treasures among the society, and to further enrich the local culture and heritage for the future generations. The findings of this paper suggest that there is a need for requirement of improved level of awareness on the value of oral history, and as well as a greater exposure through education for the younger generations and tourists, in order to ensure that oral history is appropriately understood and accepted at all levels.

Keywords Oral history · Cultural and heritage · Preserve · Tourist awareness

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Introduction

The National Committee on Oral History National Archive of Malaysia (1991) defines oral history as “the technique of eliciting the reminiscences of selected individuals through recorded interview sessions.” The committee further elaborates that the individuals selected are those considered the best able to provide such information derived from their personal involvement and experience of historical events, from their special relationship with a particular personality, or the bearing that a specific period in history may have had on their lives. The recorded interview, when transcribed, allows for the convenient use of oral history as both research as well as teaching material. In this way, oral history can be made to contribute significantly to the existing resources on local history.

In an effort to promote the writing of the history of Malaysia, it is not necessarily devoted to writing about well-known figures and major events that happened in the past. Surely these are important, but we should not forget that history includes the story and events of ordinary people. Hence, patterned topics of local history and the history of the country should be acknowledged appropriately and the opportunity to express this heritage can be done through oral history. Oral history is considered as living memories which have great importance in the history of mankind. It has also become a key resource for reconstructing, reconnecting, recreating, and recording the past and present knowledge of a society.

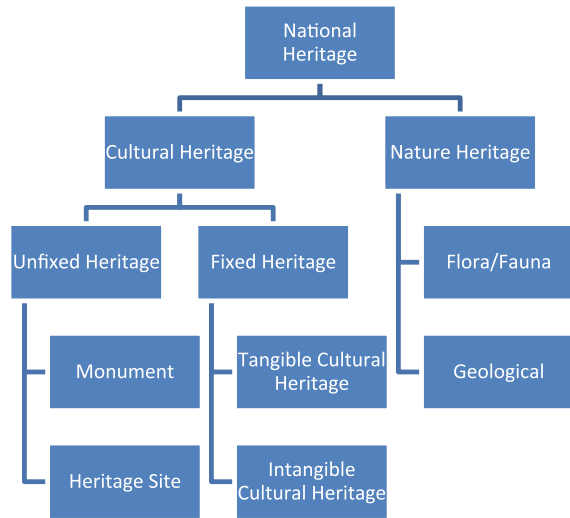
In short, oral history can be defined as an activity, a detached academic process of inquiry into the memories of people who have experienced the recent past directly. This inquiry and the responses it generates are recorded to supplement written records that have been found wanting in some areas for historical or aesthetic analysis. It is a studied abstract and analytic practice of historians and other social scientist, and it relies heavily either on manual, mechanical, or electronic recording devices (Rais 2005).

Definition of Cultural Heritage

In Malaysia, National Heritage Act 2005 (under Sect. 67) [2] has categorized heritage into two; cultural heritage and nature heritage. Cultural heritage is further subdivided into two—“unfixed heritage” and “fixed heritage.” Under “fixed heritage,” there are tangible and intangible heritage.

According to the Act, cultural heritage is divided into two aspects: tangible and intangible heritage which differ in nature, although they belong to the same category. “Tangible Heritage” refers to something that is permanently being seen and it is touchable. It can be categorized as “Static” and “Movable.” The term “Static” refers to anything that is permanently there such as historical sites of Lembah Bujang, Langkawi, Melaka; monument or building, for example Tomb, Palace,

Fig. 4.1 Categories of Malaysia National Heritage, National Heritage Act 2005 (2008)



Fortress or Minarets; and forest, cave, mountain, river, flora, and fauna are considered as nature. Meanwhile, “Movable” refers to cultural artifacts that can be moved such as manuscript and textile.

The National Heritage Act 2005 (2008) defines intangible cultural heritage as “...a phrase, language, pronunciation of the tongue, musical notes, audible lyrics, songs, folk songs, oral traditions, music, dance as generated by the performing arts, theatre, musical compositions and sound, martial arts that has existed or exists in relation to the heritage of Malaysia or any part of Malaysia or the Malaysian community in relation to heritage.” Intangible cultural heritage is important not only for its cultural manifestation itself, but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that are transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for the minorities and the mainstream social groups within a state, and it is as important for the developing states as it is for the developed ones (UNESCO) (Fig. 4.1).

Intangible Cultural Heritage as Tourism Product

Developing historical legacy does have its own advantages. This is because, in comparison to the authenticity of culture, historical heritage is easier to preserve or rebuild because they consist of buildings or monuments formed in the past. Regardless if the buildings or monuments were built thousands or hundreds of years ago, they have the potential to be redeveloped. Buildings can be restored and if they are damaged, they can be reconstructed based on past records and photos. This is

because the development of historical events has often been recorded either in the form of historical records, or oral history. Therefore, in developing historical heritage, it requires a combination of historians, experts in architecture, archeologists, and cultural figures.

Tourism activities in Malaysia have started since the eighteenth century with the arrival of more foreign travelers, mainly the Europeans and Arabians, to Malaya. Through their journey and experience of the past, they came up with oral documentation that has become widely recognized as an indispensable means of recording and preserving information. In the Malaysian's context, the correlation between tourism and oral history is separated by a huge gap. Tourism is thriving, while oral history is dying. Therefore, it is crucial to record reminiscences, experiences, testimonies, and reflections from individuals when they are still alive. Otherwise, the information would be lost to the future generation. As an old African proverb says, "when an old person dies, a library burns to the ground."

From the perspective of tourism, oral history of historical events and phenomena is important to be strengthened. Such information can be raised as a powerful element that could attract the attention of tourists. Additionally, the element of oral history has its own motives, as well as a unique attraction and potential to become the object of attention of tourists. This is because the motive of tourists can be stimulated either by real or fictional events that are to be explored, appreciated or be associated with a phenomenon, either through reading or storytelling. Despite limited available research, the needs for tourism associated with well-known people, places, and events can be identified based on the roles and effort taken by the government, tourism industry, researchers, activists, local community, and students (Richard and Wilson 2007). These needs appear to be based on these three reasons

- (a) *See and be where they have been.* This is about a desire to have a physical and concrete experience which links the tourists to past events and people. For instance, a strong factor is the desire to tread in the footsteps of famous people, or to stand where battles have taken place.
- (b) *Connecting with what they have read.* Following from the above, tourists are motivated by a desire to better understand and picture the past created for them by famous writers, either real or imagined. For example, a landscape inspired by a scene from a novel or a piece of music, which are portrayed as real events. Thus, for some people, it is important to gain insights into what motivates creative geniuses.
- (c) *Connecting with other like-minded people.* Connecting with other people with similar interests is a key reason why some will embark on a literary tour or attend a commemorative event overseas. It provides an opportunity to discuss and develop an often long held interest in a group environment.

Oral history in Sarawak is handed down from one generation to another. Most of oral history in Sarawak has been documented and published such as the Sarawak Museum Journal and Sarawak Gazette. These continued efforts are carried out by

Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka and *Pustaka Sarawak* Branch through the collection, translation, and publication in English and Malay Language. These activities are noted as increasingly important in the future as they have now become uncommon, and those who have valuable experiences have gone without their stories being documented.

Challenges

Malaysia, like any other countries, may experience the loss of its stories and experiences of the past very quickly. This is expedited by the advancement of technology whereby people rely mostly on telephone, fax, emails, and face-to-face interactions to communicate. The traditions such as writing letters, diaries, biographies, and memoirs have become less important and uncommon. As a result, one of the major weaknesses identified in the effort to rewrite the history of Malaysia is the lack of historical sources, for example the history of the states in Malaysia. Only few states possess the natural resources associated with the historical development of their states, but even then, it is only up to the nineteenth century. For instance, the Sarawak Museum was the earliest institution in the country to carry out oral history and started recording materials in 1957.

In other situations, the lack of awareness among many Malaysians has contributed to the loss of cultural heritage. For instance, Sabah was once an equal if not superior counterpart to Malaya as a former colony of the British. The obliteration of Sabah townships has been recorded as the most devastating in the history of the British Empire during WWII. Sadly, the documentation on Sabah's architectural legacy is greatly lacking. Neither the archives nor libraries in both Sabah and peninsular Malaysia had kept much information on Sabah's traditional houses or pre-war buildings (Richard 2014). Today, Sabah does not have many architectural remnants left from this period of history that accurately portray its past glory as a former colony of the British.

Therefore, in circumstances where documenting stories and past events is no longer a common practice, it is the oral history that may help determine that not all development is lost or forgotten as historical evidence. Oral history can play a big role in maintaining and increasing resources available with regard to Malaysian history in this century. Additionally, oral history can bring the history in and out of the community and help the less privileged toward self-dignity and self-confidence. It makes contact and creates understanding between social classes and different generations. With mutual understanding between both individuals and historians, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or time. Oral history offers challenges to the acknowledged myths of history and as a means for an essential transformation of the social meaning of history.

Reevaluating the Value of Oral History

Some scholars in Malaysia have expressed concerns over the development of historical stories in an increasingly less interested society due to the lack of efforts to collect, document, and highlight past events or stories. There are several factors contributing to this phenomenon. The first factor is the lack of exposure among the public, which includes the authorities, practitioners, or educators at all levels. Practitioners who are too old can no longer afford to continue the effort and struggle. Meanwhile, most of the younger generations do not have much interest in acquiring the skill in oral history from the elders. Thus, the skill on oral history continues to disappear, and is not shared and passed on to the younger generations. Resulting from this, much of the personal history of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries would be lost to future historians.

Another factor is the lack of energy and expertise of young people, mainly academicians who are interested in finding, collecting, and documenting historical development. Those who are interested in the field of oral history are not many. This may be due to the negative perception that oral history does not have much commercial value. In fact, oral history allows one to create valuable sources or materials by talking to people in the community where questions can be answered about the past, which may help in the process of documentation. Besides, hopes, feelings, aspirations, disappointments, family histories, and personal experiences can be learnt through oral history.

Apart from that, the lack of research done by scholars or students in higher institutions on the use of oral history is another factor contributing to the concerns over the development of historical stories in Malaysia. For students, available documented materials or resources are commonly used in the process of learning as opposed to using oral history as the primary source of knowledge. Therefore, oral history is commonly treated as reading materials instead of the source of knowledge to be researched further. If this continues to occur, the community or the public may experience a great loss of their cultural heritage because oral history can contribute greatly to the development of the local community, and tourists alike. History after all is all about human experience. Through oral history, researchers and interviewees can come together in conversation about a commonly shared interest as with all human interactions and this has the potential to be tremendously rewarding for both parties.

Recommendation

In general, the community displays the lack of awareness on the purpose of oral history, except for those who have the interest to do study this field. The position of oral history is much marginalized in the society. In educational settings, not many students recognize and appreciate oral history. This could be due to the perception

that oral history has no commercial value compared to other subjects, and that oral history promises limited employment opportunities for the students. Such a response should be observed and reviewed in order for oral history to be duly acknowledged and developed among students and the society at large. Hence, oral history should be disclosed as a subject in schools either in the secondary or primary school to raise awareness on the importance of oral history among these young generations.

In the context of tourism, respective ministries such as the Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture may collaborate with other agencies in displaying oral history collection at places of tourist attraction such as the Cultural Village, museum, archives, and some other places. This would encourage tourists to visit for the purpose of enriching their knowledge about the country and its history.

Conclusion

Information collected and gathered through oral history should be treated as guidance, not as the ultimate source because memories often fade and facts get confused with other facts. Information obtained through oral history, however, exists nowhere else and must be taken at face value. Actual historical stories never fade as long as people continue to tell the stories. Hence, we need to mobilize efforts to document the stories more meaningfully through oral history. This is because oral history collection gives us an opportunity to review the sequence of events that happened in the past for us to understand the legacy of the past in order to move into the future. Besides, exposure to oral history is important because we can evaluate the history for a better life at present and in the future. For example, oral history collection on the reforms brought about by the influence of the West colonial power, particularly Britain and the Netherlands, began to change the mentality, philosophy, and the social community in Malaysia at the threshold of the eighteenth century. In short, history is taken as a point of fact that cannot be denied; forming and shaping movements of the human mind. Oral history has been an important method to assist researchers in discovering and using the materials in order to sustain the intangible cultural heritage in Malaysia. Oral history is a valuable research tool with historical value and nature.

The discussion above is one small aspect in the field of tourism and oral history. With a strong growth in tourism industry, oral tradition as a form of culture should be in line with the development. Nevertheless, cultural factors remain important because humans do naturally have an instinctive curiosity to witness the splendor of the cultural heritage of a race for knowledge expansion. Since Malaysia does not have Angkor Wat, Taj Mahal, and the Great Wall of China, proper attention should be given to stories through oral history such as ethnic diversity and cultural heritage, food heritage, performing arts heritage, and others in Malaysia that could become tourist attractions too.

Oral history is a priceless cultural heritage. Although it is only a piece of heritage, its role and its contribution toward constructing and shaping thought and taste is immense. Its role is not only as a source of information but also as a vehicle for education, sciences, culture, and history. Hence, it needs to be maintained, improved, excavated, searched, and documented in variety forms of media. Oral history can serve as a tourism product and can contribute to a country's economy. It should be seen as more than a mere subject that can provide knowledge to the society, readers, tourists, and researchers.

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