

التاريخ الشفوي والمشفاهة Oral History and Orality



Pr. SAIDI Meziane
Professor of modern
and contemporary
History

ENS Bouzareah
smeziane68@yahoo.fr

الملخص: أثار التاريخ الشفوي ، منذ عقود من الزمن ، اهتماماً متزايداً لدى الباحثين ، وهو الاهتمام الذي يسّره التقدم التكنولوجي الذي نشهده في حاضرتنا عند معالجة المصادر الشفوية. غالباً ما كان المؤرخون ، يهتمّون استخدامها على الرغم من إدراكهم للإمكانيات التي توفرها المصادر الشفوية ، لكنهم أضحوا يذكرون على أنّ التاريخ الشفوي يمثل رافداً هاماً مثيراً للاهتمام في أبحاثهم. إنّ خجل المؤرخين ، وبخاصة في الجزائر ، فيما يتعلق باستعمال التاريخ الشفوي والمشفاهة ، يبقى مثيراً للاهتمام من حيث أنه يتناقض مع خطاب إعادة تقييم الفاعلين في السرد التاريخي والاهتمام بصانعي الحدث.

يتمّ التعبير عن حيوية الشهادات الشفوية وتكريس المشفاهة ، من خلال التوسع في الانتفاع من استعمال الثورة التقنية التي تشهدها الوسائل السمعية البصرية . من هنا يبرز سؤال له دلالة : ما الذي يجب القيام به لتحقيق أقصى استفادة من هذا التآزر بين الكتابة التاريخية و الرواية الشفوية والمشفاهة ؟ وما هي الاستراتيجيات التي يجب اعتمادها لحماية التراث الحضاري المتنوع للمجتمعات مع الإبقاء متفتحين على العالم ؟.

إنّ تحديد مفاهيم التاريخ الشفوي والمشفاهة ، ومزالق وصعوبات التاريخ الشفوي ، وأنواع الشهادات واستخداماتها ، وآثارها المستعصية ومشاكل الذاكرة والعديد من النقاط الأخرى ستكون موضوع هذه الدراسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التاريخ الشفوي- المصادر الشفوية- الشهادات - الذاكرة - المشفاهة .

Abstract : Oral History has aroused, decades ago, an increasing interest among researchers, an interest facilitated by the technological progress that we are witnessing in our present when dealing with oral sources. Historians have often neglected its use despite their awareness of the possibilities provided by oral sources, but they have come to mention that oral History represents an important and interesting source in their research. The shyness of historians, especially in Algeria, with regard to the use of oral history and oral history, remains interesting in that it contradicts the discourse of re-evaluating the actors in the historical narrative and the interest in the markers of the event.

The vitality of Oral Testimonies and the consecration of oral testimony are expressed through the expansion of benefit from the use of the technical revolution in audiovisual means. From here, a significant question arises: What should be done to make the most of this synergy between historical writing and oral and oral narration? What are the strategies that must be adopted to protect the diverse cultural heritage of societies while remaining open to the world?

Determining the concepts of oral History and oral history, the pitfalls and difficulties of oral history, the types and uses of testimonies, their intractable effects, memory problems and many other points will be the subject of this study.

Keywords: Oral History - Oral Sources - Testimonies - Memory - Oral.

Introduction:

Since decades Oral History Has aroused an increasing interest among researchers, an interest facilitated by the technological progress that we are witnessing in our present when dealing with oral sources. Historians have often neglected its use despite their awareness of the possibilities provided by oral sources, but they have come to mention that Oral History represents an important and interesting tributary in their research. The shyness of Historians, especially in Algeria, with regard to the use of Oral History and Orality remains interesting in that it contradicts the discourse of re-evaluation of the actors in the Historical narrative and the interest in the makers of the event.

The vitality of Oral Testimonies and the consecration of oral testimony are expressed through the expansion of benefit from the use of the technical revolution in audiovisual means Based on the above, some significant questions arise: What should be done to make the most of this synergy between Historical writing and Orality and oral narration? What are the strategies that must be adopted to protect the diverse cultural heritage of societies while remaining open to the world?

Thus, this study aims at determining the concepts of Oral History and Orality, the pitfalls and difficulties of Oral History, the types and uses of testimonies, their intractable effects, memory problems.

1- Definition of Oral History and Orality :

Oral History is the practice of recording and disseminating tales from everyday life and using them to trace the history of a people, a place or a family. It is considered to be an invaluable tool for reconstructing the atmosphere and mentalities of an era, as it highlights a series of small, real facts that constitute existence. This history is extremely useful to fill the lack of documentation with a great risk however that one falsely fills it. Indeed, when one has nothing else than the Oral History one falls in a situation not very credible, it is that to have a history with single source.

Orality is a mode of communication based on the human word and with no other means of conservation than individual memory. By extension, Orality designates what, in the written text, bears witness to the spoken word and to oral tradition. This modality of oral expression - living and centuries old - continues to ensure the daily communication and to express the socio-cultural experience in all its fullness and complexity. In short, it is "**the totality of all types of verbal testimony transmitted by a people about its own past**".

This oral tradition therefore constitutes the collective memory of the social group in the absence of written documents. This term covers storytelling, myths, legends, tales, proverbs, popular poems, mottos, sacred and secular songs, epics, etc. Even a cursory analysis of these different genres of oral expression shows that tradition relates to the group's past as well as to its present and future. (voldman, 1986)

Orality must therefore be considered as a modality of civilisation where the most relevant generational information for the survival of the community only needs human memory and not writing. In these oral societies, oral exchanges are conceived as an essential element of the basis of community cohesion. They dominate in all aspects of community life: communication, entertainment, transmission of knowledge... (Ben-abbas, 2013).

Oral Tradition refers to the set of testimonies - comprising various elements of content - transmitted verbally, totally or partially, from generation to generation of a people about its past. As the foundation of collective memory and an element of identity reference to be protected, it never ceases to gather in its various genres the common experience accumulated over time. Concerned with human needs, it conceives all knowledge by reference to practical proximity and through personal contact with the elderly, imitation and participation in community life. It therefore helps people to acquire a wide range of practical knowledge about various aspects of human activity without the need for verbal explanation, which is considered to be non-operational or even non-fruitful. This learning takes place in a natural and ecological context since people in this type of oral society tend to live in close relationship with their environment and with others, unlike in the writing civilisation where people think in terms of distance and abstraction about their way of life (Ben-Abbas, 2013).

By situating Oral History as a discipline in its narrow sense of the term, **it refers to a research technique in history, what textbooks call an auxiliary science of History.** It consists of collecting oral testimonies on past events, assuming, of course, that these events are recent enough for witnesses to be able to give their testimony. In this context, Oral History is mainly concerned with supplementing written documents, with providing information on poorly documented events of the past.

The fields in which Oral History plays a central role are numerous: the history of colonised peoples, the history of the world of work, the history of civil resistance, the history of refugees, the history of women, the history of expatriates (the Algerians expatriated to New Caledonia are held up as a concrete example), etc. In all these fields, the actors of history leave few written traces. Questioning them makes it possible to fill in the gaps in the documentation. In other fields, such as political history, military history or religious history, Oral History serves as a supplement. It is a useful complement to written documentation.

A second essential contribution of Oral History is its ability to capture subjectivity. A well-conducted interview gives a better account of emotions, desires, fears and hesitations than a meeting report, a press article, or even correspondence or a diary. (Veillon,1992)

Oral history, for many who practice it, is more than an auxiliary science of history. It is an academic discipline in the true sense of the word, close to History but also to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology and having, like any academic discipline, educated and intellectual societies, specialised journals and university chairs. (Wallenborn, .2002). It is necessary, in this context, to define the meaning of the expressions: Oral archives, Oral sources.

The Oral Archive is a sound archive that contains only recordings of the words or speeches of people or institutions in the course of their ordinary activity. The oral archive is collected by an Archivist, Historian Ethnologist, Sociologist, Investigator

or others, in order to be deposited in an institution, at the disposal of future researchers; it can be for example speeches of politicians, tribal or patriotic songs, etc. They are not oral testimonies collected by a researcher during a survey; in this case, we speak of an Oral Source. In fact, the Oral Source is a 'provoked' source, in the sense that it is collected from a witness by a researcher, depending on the type of information he or she needs for the research.

The archival documents that the colonisers produced and left behind did not cover all areas of life nor did they cover all socio-professional categories in an exhaustive manner. The method of oral surveys offers an opportunity to fill this gap in historical writing. It is therefore a matter of reconstructing social history as experienced by the informants themselves and not as perceived by historians or other authors of books or archive documents. (Dibwe, 2006)

Fortunately, the introduction of new techniques, audio and video recordings, as well as the evolution of the historical method, have made it possible to consider oral sources in different perspectives.

Nowadays, the tape recorder makes it possible to record and preserve indefinitely, on media, the testimonies of those who played a political, cultural or economic role, but also the testimonies of the "forgotten" actors of history: those whom traditional history has long evoked only through figures and statistics, without seeking to take an interest in the daily aspect of their life. The recognition of oral archives has greatly contributed to the development of the History of their "lived experience" and over time, they have become objects of History, making their contribution to it.

2- "Pitfalls" and difficulties of Oral History:

Giving a voice to a witness means soliciting his or her memory and this source memory must be treated by the Historian as an ordinary source which requires a methodology adapted to the objectives of his or her research. The memory that interests the historian is obviously the collective memory and oral testimony is far from being the only source for tracing its history.

Some historians refused to legitimise Oral History because of the unreliable nature of the sources. It must be acknowledged that this is indeed a major problem: the word is fluid, what is affirmed by a witness can be contradicted a few moments later by that same witness.

Another weakness is that the witness only gives as much information as he or she is willing to give: the interview is a bit like a game of hide-and-seek between the researcher and the witness. For various reasons, the individual who is being questioned may give false answers: for example, when the researcher's attitude forces him or her to be defensive, either because the researcher gives too much of an impression of being the one who knows everything, or because his or her questions are too probing. In other cases, the witness may also be defensive because the questions are too 'uncomfortable' and represent either an embarrassment or a danger to the person answering them: in this case, the temptation to falsify the answers may be great, in order to 'cover their tracks'.

Among the questions posed by oral sources, the following can be noted:

- Are historians who use such sources not "historians under surveillance", since the actors of the period and the field studied can contest our assertions, rise up against our interpretations, proclaim in the name of their actual presence at the time of the unfolding of the facts, at best that we are mistaken despite our good faith, at worst that we are falsifying the Truth.

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- What is the place of the encounter with the witness? Is the oral source, and in particular the testimony, a specific source?
- Is the oral source a way of filling the gaps in the archives used? Is it justified in the case of particular objects of study (the study of memory or that of daily life, the analysis of the evolution of representations or of discourses on discourses)?

The collection of oral sources, when it is a question of interviews with witnesses, requires particular precautions: the historian employs a technique specific to the historical interview, but he or she must also have recourse to the teachings of sociology and psychology in order to know how to conduct his or her investigations and, above all, to be able to interpret the silences, hesitations, repetitions, slips of the tongue, etc., in the discourse of his or her interlocutors. It is also necessary to be patient at times: for example, when one seeks to obtain more details from a witness who is reluctant to say more, whether because he or she is reserved by nature.

It must be said that historical testimony and oral archives are major sources for the historian of the present time. They raise the question of the use of testimony, the issues of memory(s) and particular methodological concerns.

3- The perverse effects of testimony:

Oral testimony is subject to a series of "perverse effects", which require great vigilance on the part of the historian because they act as much on the witness as on the researcher (Frank, r. 1992)

. There are several sources of error in the interviewee:

- The witness is questioned about events that took place in the more or less recent past; he or she must remember them and then pass them on to the researcher. Unfortunately, his memory is influenced by what he has experienced, read or heard from others. A human being's memory is built up from his knowledge and

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experiences. This is what researchers call the "handicap of hindsight". (Becher, 1986)

- When recalling memories, there may also be interactions between the individual, private memory and the collective, public memory. Some people may, for example, be sincerely convinced that they have experienced certain events, even though they have only heard about them. Others, because they belong to a particular social group, may claim to have participated in certain events, because these events are inscribed in the collective memory of the group with which they identify or want to be identified: they 'lie' to conform to the social role they play or want to appear to play in front of the researcher.

- The same type of situation can also arise when the witness does not want to give an opinion different from the common one, for fear of being noticed or attracting an unfavourable judgement from the interviewer.

- The witness may also give wrong answers out of ignorance: he or she may declare ignorance, but he or she may also unintentionally give wrong answers because he or she sincerely believes that they are right.

- The 're-hierarchisation' of events is also a problem when someone is asked to talk about his or her past: the witness may give great importance to certain facts, which he or she has experienced, while others, more important at the collective level, are almost minimised.

(Peschanski, 1992)

For his part, the researcher can be a victim of illusions:

- He must not forget that he is involved in the interview and that, consequently, he intervenes in the construction of the testimony. The witness's answers can be influenced, more or less unconsciously, by the interviewer.

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- The researcher must also be wary of the misleading sense of reality of the testimony: since it is the experience of the person testifying that is evoked, one might be inclined, as others would say, to take everything at face value. (Frank, 1992).

4- Types of testimony:

1 - Free written testimony:

The person who testifies in writing is most often an officer and very rarely a private who will rather reserve his testimony for his family. Any transition from oral to written testimony implies a distortion. The written testimony is not raw but thought out, reflected upon, corrected, polished and even censored, especially if the feeling of belonging to a corps, a formation or an institution is strong. A narrator writing without any other control than himself may tend to retouch, exaggerate and even erase reality in favour of what he would have wanted it to be. The testimony will, with a few exceptions, be amputated of certain elements that should not be given to the civilian world, as the duty of reserve of the military is much stronger than that of other bodies ..(Veuillon, d. 1992).

What are the motivations of those who testify?

These motivations can be very diverse and not always clearly expressed. We can detect the following motivations:

- Suffering, which leads to the need to tell, to externalise it, to make the sacrifice known. This motive can provoke the opposite phenomenon, i.e. a closure, a silence which can also be a cultural reflex. In traditional Africa, painful or inglorious phenomena are kept silent.

- **The need for truth** even if it goes against what is said. The justification is usually in response to criticisms that have been made, even if they are not directly addressed to the witness. The author considers it his or her duty to say what he or she has experienced or witnessed. This does not mean that he tells everything.
- **The desire to be known**, especially if the witness has occupied an important place. This motivation often goes hand in hand with justification. Or even the hope of obtaining an important position.
- **The need to settle scores**, especially if the witness no longer belongs to the military institution. In this case, the testimony is essentially hypercritical and retains only the most negative facts.
- **To pass on a message to the younger generations in civilian society.**
(Veuillon, 1992)

It is imperative to say that many important events have been obscured while others have been magnified for political reasons. Therefore, all living actors have the duty to tell their stories in order to prevent the truth from being distorted by the falsifiers of history (Bracco, h. 2008) and I cannot help but admit that it is urgent that each of the living actors, whatever their level of responsibility, bequeath their testimony in whatever form to the younger generations.

The historian must therefore undertake all this deciphering to make the best use of the testimony. It is not always possible to do this, either because the witness has

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disappeared, or because it requires considerable work for a result that will never be one hundred percent credible. The witness who writes about a great character will tend to idealise him or her, especially if he or she was very close, and even to pose as his or her defender.

The Historian's contact with this type of testimony and witness is frequent in military history for contemporary periods, especially at the request of the historian. When he has the opportunity to meet the witness, the historian often realises that he is repeating what he has written and that it is difficult to lead him to other areas. The written word causes a kind of confinement. The witness becomes a prisoner of his written testimony. If they manage to move away from it, they always end up returning to it.

This type of testimony remains useful for the historian who can confront it with written sources. It gives a more human dimension to history, that of lived experience.

2 - Oral testimony:

The historian is necessarily more active since he/she has to establish a dialogue. In this case, we find the problem of the witness's position, which is a determining factor: the higher the position, the more difficult it will be to obtain good information and to get out of a conventional discourse. The quality of information is often - although this is not an absolute rule - inversely proportional to rank. A high-ranking witness will always be very cautious, whereas a low-ranking witness will not be so cautious and will not feel connected to the military institution. This is not unique to military history, it can be found in other fields such as politics.

The testimony can be free in its entirety or guided by the historian who establishes a basic questionnaire according to his or her concerns. The historian tries to keep the

witness on the path he or she wishes. This more restrictive method runs the risk of missing important information. We know, moreover, how much the form of the questions can condition the answers. This difficulty increases when the witness and the interviewer do not belong to the same civilisation or do not speak the same

language, which requires an interpreter, with all that this entails in terms of retention and interests. (Domergue-cloarec, 2008).

A good oral testimony requires a minimum of knowledge of the other person, their environment and their life. In other words, a period of taming is needed, which is essential in the African field, for example. The researcher must know how to respect customs and habits and know the respondent's place in society. You must also learn to let the other person speak, avoiding interrupting him or her, because the other person has his or her own way of expressing himself or herself, which could take time.

The researcher does not have to demonstrate his knowledge. They are there to learn, which requires a certain humility. The witness must be given the opportunity to communicate his or her emotion. It is easier to do this orally. Free testimony is really only free at the beginning, because it is quite rare for the historian to be satisfied with the respondent alone. He will tend to ask for details, dates, indications that are not necessarily directly related to the subject. The witness may, on this occasion, let slip some interesting information. The disadvantage of this type of investigation is the time that the researcher is able to devote to it, data that is sometimes less precise but of better quality, and a very loose chronology that can be compensated for by consulting archives. The information, even indirect, allows a better psychological understanding of the subject who can - with time and trust - provide documents. In

the case of veterans, it can be interesting to know their claims, which can explain the importance they attach to this or that fact or aspect. (Bracco, .2008).

Questions about the reliability of oral sources concern their content. Their content depends on the temporal distance between the events experienced and their narration - the individual's ability to memorise is at stake here - and on the context in which it is expressed, i.e. the collective memory of the event, the surrounding political context, and the readings or broadcasts that contribute to the witness's speech. The same story cannot be told by the same witness at different times in his or her life. In short, the content depends on when the interview is recorded, when the source is produced. The content of the oral source also depends on the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. The witness's idea of what is at stake in the testimony, but also the interviewer's explicit and implicit questions, define what is actually dictable. The subjectivity of the interviewing historian is interwoven with that of the witness. This makes the interpretation of the oral source extremely complex. The difficulty in critiquing oral sources, and thus in interpreting them, comes from the hesitation to attribute the result of the discourse to one of three factors: is a silence the result of the relationship the witness had with the interviewer, or of the vagaries of the individual's memory, or of the absence of an echo of the event in the collective memory? Or a combination of several of these factors (Wallenborn,.2002)

The witness in military history must be well situated in relation to the events. It is certain that the vision of a soldier in a post is the vision of only a small part of the events and that it cannot be identical to that of a sector commander or a chief of staff. We must therefore beware of any abusive generalisations.

The recording of testimony is a factor that should not be overlooked. Not everyone reacts in the same way. We have seen - not only in underdeveloped countries - that the researcher who writes down appears less dangerous to the witness than the one who records with a tape recorder. This is a bit like the problem in archives when you are not allowed to photocopy a document, but you are allowed to copy it, although you know that the photocopy will not be legally admissible unless it is certified. Experience shows that in the case of a recording, the witness tends to self-censor or ask for a particular passage to be deleted when listening again (Domergue, d. 2008).

Coclusion:

More research is needed and actors should be encouraged to contribute to the identification of the role of oral and written testimonies in the construction and valorisation of historical facts.

I will end by employing a note from the French Historian Voldman: "the difference is not between the written and the oral, but between the assignments of History and the aspirations of the 'Historiés', between the absence of the dead, forever silent, and the presence of the living, at any moment free to tell it differently" (Voldman, . 1986).

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