

# Generating knowledge for archives, libraries and museums: oral history research methodology in the twenty first century

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*This article focuses on our empirical two-days Pre-Conference Training on Oral History at the National University of Lesotho (NUL) Library. It offers conversation on the significance of oral history research methodology in the generation of knowledge found in archives, libraries, and museums in 21st-century Africa. The rationale for our paper is based on our notes after the training to demonstrate that when oral history is “reduced” into writing, its methodology and methods contribute to the generation of knowledge documented, stored, preserved, presented, and accessed by the users in archives, libraries, and museums. Our article uses selected oral history case studies from the authors’ previous work with oral history methodologies, both in their workplaces in Lesotho and South Africa, and for their MA and PhD dissertations in the interrelated disciplines of history and heritage that they conducted in these countries. The authors share their practical experiences working on oral history research, and their findings are that the oral history research methodology and methods are significant in generating knowledge for the archives, libraries, and museums as institutions charged with storing, documenting, preserving and disseminating knowledge production; and granting access to the users.*

**Keywords:** Oral History, Methodology, Archives, and Libraries, Museums, Lesotho, South Africa

## 1 Introduction

The significance of oral history as a research methodology and method in generating empirical knowledge is undisputed. The significance of oral traditions cannot be stressed enough. In the study, The Role of Traditional Music in Writing of Cultural History: The case of the Abaluyia of Western Kenya, Amutabi (2002:204) states that:

Through our memory and its reconstructive process, music that depends not only upon evidence but also upon joint and controlled societal participation can be described as the active and dynamic archive that can unravel and lend itself to comparative analysis and logical deduction of historical facts. Thus, it appears that while songs are not necessarily the African historian’s nirvana, they can, when judiciously combined with the findings of oral traditions, oral literature, and oral history; archaeology; paleontology; archives; and other fields of study, assist us in our collective enterprise of reconstructing Africa’s past.

Scholars such as Vansina (1965) have written widely about oral traditions as a historical methodology. This article departs from Field’s (2007:8-9) assertion about what oral history is. Field (2007:8-9) maintains that numerous historians have shown that oral history goes beyond supplementing written historical records or filling in the gaps of the archives. Field (2007:8-9) goes on to write that:

The recordings conserved by archives constitute forms of intellectual and cultural capital that belong to communities, but institutions have a key role to play as responsible custodians of peoples’ stories. Oral histories and audio-visual archiving can help transform the image of ‘the archive’ as a dusty old place to a dynamic resource for communities, especially students, at all educational levels.

## 2 Literature review

For this co-authored article, the authors deployed a narrative literature review approach on oral history as a research methodology to generate knowledge for the archives, libraries and museums. The published literature on oral history methodology and methods has been contributed to widely in the Southern African region and in South Africa and Lesotho in particular. This generated knowledge is stored, preserved and/or curated in archives, libraries, and museums. It is then

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made available to users, who rely on it as empirical evidence for their studies and as part of the presentation and interpretation of exhibited works for visitors in museums. It does this by showing that, through oral history interviews, which have been recorded as related by the informants in oral history research, knowledge is created (Sekata 2023). The standard practice is that recordings, tapes, and films are deposited at archives for safekeeping and may be made available at request once all the necessary protocols have been satisfied. It is this same wealth of knowledge that the museums rely on to form part of the interpretation of curated exhibits, especially those that contain limited information or have been interpreted from a narrow or biased perspective. Even in the 21st century, we continue the journey to demonstrate that African culture has its roots in oral tradition. All societies have relied on word of mouth as a medium through which knowledge is passed from one generation to another; before anything was written, it was in oral form. This knowledge was stored in people's minds and has been criticised for being prone to distortion (Thabane 1986).

The eight volumes of the UNESCO General History of Africa (GHA) have, in righting the wrongs about how the history of the continent has been written with the colonial and imperial lenses, identified African oral tradition, the collective memory of peoples that holds the thread to their history. The genesis of these volumes is 1964, when:

UNESCO launched the elaboration of the General History of Africa with a view to remedy the general ignorance on Africa's history. The challenge consisted of reconstructing Africa's history, freeing it from racial prejudices ensuing from slave trade and colonisation, and promoting an African perspective (Ogot 1999: 3).

As a consequence of the significance of the GHA in decolonising and Africanising the history of Africa, with its stated project objective being to document the history of Africa, this paper adopted GHA's definition of this research methodology, namely that "Oral history is the collection of historical information from people who have experienced or witnessed events. The GHA project incorporates oral traditions and other data to create a history of Africa that is free from racial prejudice." In addition, this "historical information" has been passed, as African knowledge production, from one generation to the next.

Furthermore, in their presentation of the workshop, they wanted to stress that oral history methodology continues to have relevance today in the 21st century because this research method is at the centre of Africa's history against colonialism and apartheid. According to Ramphela (1995:ix), this history is in grave danger of being forgotten "in post-apartheid South Africa where so much forgetfulness is willed upon people and where it is much more convenient to forget the past than recall it". The tradition of storytelling in African culture, and especially of song, is slowly disappearing as a result of globalisation. Ramphela (1995) argues that "Storytelling is a historical imperative. We cannot successfully navigate uncharted waters without some script to guide us." This paper is an attempt to capture and remind readers of that African past.

The African people's oral traditions remind us of Amilcar Cabral's work, *Return to the Source*, which, to all intents and purposes, which can be viewed as the search for the people's identity and dignity (Cabral 1973). To do that, the authors concur with Cabral (1973) that one requires to "return to the source," a theoretical formulation whose relevance to this paper is that the culture whose aspects include the oral history interviews of communities is an effort on the part of the concerned society at any particular time in their history, to return to the sources of their African history in the two countries this paper focuses on, namely South Africa and Lesotho. Cabral (1973) observed that the identity of African art, dress, and other symbols of African culture were attempts to reject the African's outcast status in a racist society. This observation was the central problem of his work, *Return to the Source*, which he saw as a solution to the search for African identity and dignity. The most original and comprehensive discussion of culture can be found in Cabral's analysis of culture and its relationship to national liberation struggles:

Whatever may be the ideological or idealistic characteristic of cultural expressions, culture is the essential element of the history of a people. Culture is, perhaps, the product of this history just as the flower is the product of a plant. Like history, or because of history, culture has as its material base the level of the productive forces and the mode of production. (Cabral 1973: 42)

Cabral's linkage of culture with national liberation struggle was quite clear:

One can argue that any attempts to clarify the true role of culture in the development of the liberation movement can make a useful contribution to the broad struggle of the people against imperialist domination (Cabral 1973:59)

Further, Cabral (1973: 61) noted how the masses escaped cultural domination:

It is also the result of the effectiveness of cultural resistance of the people, who when they are subjected to political domination and economic exploitation find that their own culture acts as a bulwark in preserving their identity.

Cabral (1973: 63) saw this need for a 'return to the source' as a basis for struggle once one was willing to move beyond the individual to the collective expression of the people. He summed up the importance of the process as follows:

The "return to the source" is of no historical importance unless it brings not only real involvement in the struggle for independence, but also complete and absolute identification with the hopes of the mass of the people, who contest not only foreign culture but also the foreign domination as a whole. Otherwise, the return to the source is nothing more than an attempt to find short-term benefits knowingly or unknowingly a kind of political opportunism.

In *Culture and Domination*, La Guma (1976) writes:

Colonial power cannot impose a complete cultural occupation. The majority of the people retain their identity and are the one entity really able to preserve and create it, that is, they can make history. A people's cultural manifestations, including their literature, oral and written, their songs and poetry, reflect this resistance, reflect the various stages of development of the anti-imperialist movement.

### **3 Aim and objectives**

In 2024, the Basotho nation celebrated the country's bicentennial. As part of the festivities, the National University of Lesotho (NUL) hosted an international conference titled, "Celebrating the Preservation of Lesotho's Documentary Heritage: A Dialogue on Preserving Knowledge Heritage for Future Generations", at the *Thaba Bosiu Cultural Village in Maseru*, Lesotho, on 22 to 24 August 2024. As part of this conference, the organisers at the NUL, led by the university librarian, Dr Buhle Mbambo-Thata, arranged a two-day pre-conference oral history workshop, on 20 to 21 August 2024, with the participants coming from Africa and beyond. Ramoupi was requested to be the lead facilitator of this oral history workshop. He enlisted his colleague, Mr Thabang Khanye, who is the archivist at the UFS Archives; and his PhD student and a Lesotho national, Ms Maneo Ralebitso. They co-facilitated the workshop due to their individual experiences of working with the methodologies of oral history in the archives, workplace, and their research studies.

### **4 Methodology and methods of oral history training facilitation at the NUL pre-conference workshop**

This paper relies on oral history as a research methodology to generate knowledge for the archives, libraries, and museums. It uses case studies from Lesotho and South Africa, which relied on oral history methods. These methods ranged from in-depth interviews to focus group interviews. The interviews were conducted with people who had knowledge of the subject being investigated. It used the authors' experiences in several oral history studies from South Africa and Lesotho. The genesis of this paper is based on their presentation at the two-day pre-conference oral history workshop, including the feedback and input shared by the approximately 30 participants, who also have experience working with oral history methods. Ramoupi, Khanye, and Ralebitso facilitated a session or two during this time.

It starts with experiences from Ramoupi, Khanye and Ralebitso. Ramoupi discusses the two South African case studies, namely: "The Umnini Trust of 1858: Establishment of the Natal Government and oral history interviews", which was a master's dissertation titled "The amaThuli and the Mnini Trust: A Documentary and Oral History" (Ramoupi 1999). The second case study is the Robben Island Museum Memories Project, which is a collection of oral history interviews with former political prisoners and warders of the Robben Island Maximum Security Prison Alcatraz of the Apartheid State in South Africa. The Robben Island Museum Memories Project, a collection of oral history interviews, was the main data for a master's or PhD dissertation on Robben Island. In this article, the authors share their discussions on the practical experiences with working on oral history research during the oral history pre-conference held at NUL Library, as discussed above.

On day one of the workshop, 20 August 2024, the lead facilitator, Neo Lekgotla Laga Ramoupi, who's an oral historian, opened the discussion by presenting Session 1 that addressed and covered the following areas: "What is Oral History", "Oral History as a Research Tool", "Oral Testimony and Oral Tradition", "Why Oral History?", and "Ethics." After the tea-break, the archivist Thabang Khanye presented Session 2 that covered and addressed the following: "Sources of Evidence", "Types of Sources", "Information Agencies", "Importance and Role of Archives", "Archaeological Evidence", "Primary Sources", "Secondary Sources", "Validity", "Relevance", "Reliability" and "Bias."

After the lunch break, the oral historian, Ramoupi, returned to present Session 3 that looked at: *“Doing Oral History In Practice”*. In this session, Ramoupi had prepared for the participants to view the samples of audio-visual recorded and filmed oral history interviews from his Robben Island Museum writing book research project published in 2021 titled, *Robben Island and Rainbow Dreams: The Making of Robben Island Museum, First Official Heritage Institution of Democratic South Africa* (HSRC 2021). Ramoupi was the project leader of this book because he was awarded “Catalytic Research Programme Grant-Working Group Funded Project”, by the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS) in South Africa. However, due to time constraints on Day 1 of the workshop, this was omitted so that there would be ample time for the 20-30 participants to share their own experiences and expertise with ‘doing oral history in practice.’ The two interviews that Ramoupi selected were by the former President of the Republic of South Africa, Mr Kgalema Motlanthe and by Mr Ahmed Kathrada, who was the inaugural Council Chairperson of the Robben Island Museum Council from 1997, when the museum opened as a National Museum and Monument.

Secondly, Ramoupi had samples of only audio recorded oral history interviews; and lastly there were also samples of no recorded oral history interviews with the intention to divide the participants into groups of three to five persons and interview one of their group members. This was an exercise for a practical example of ‘doing oral history in practice’, while the other members of each group engage in notetaking of any MISSING WORD(S) that they are observing in this practice.

While the actual viewing and listening of the two samples above, Ramoupi, in his presentation, spoke about the challenges and opportunities that the two (Motlanthe and Kathrada Oral History) interviews presented and still requested that the participants take mental notes, so when the workshop moves to the Question & Answer (Q&A) and to the discussion and conversation session later on, all could make their critique/assess/evaluate these two recorded and filmed oral history interviews samples.

The afternoon sessions are always a challenge at workshops, conferences, and colloquiums because they take place after lunch, and it was extremely good. However, the fourth session was made very stimulating by the archivist, Khanye, who, through his decades of working in the National Archives of South Africa (NASA) in Hamilton Street in Pretoria, just made the participants laugh and get all of them involved. Session 4 covered the following aspects: “Limitations of Oral History”, “How to deal with limitations of Oral History?”, “Value of Oral History”, “Archiving Oral History Interviews”, “Dos and Don’ts of Oral History”, “Structuring Topics”, “Pre-Interview”, “Post Interview”, and lastly, “Mock Interview” as additional samples.

The last session of the afternoon was presented by the PhD student, Ralebitso, and she covered the following: “Practical Experiences of Conducting Oral History Interviews in Lesotho”, “Community Engagement with Oral History Methods”, “Communities’ Participation in Oral History Research”, “The Use of a Recording Device”, “What Happens After the Completion of Oral History Research?”

Ramoupi’s presentation at the NUL pre-conference oral history workshop focused on his work at the Robben Island Museum between 2000 and 2003. He was an oral historian and researcher involved with the task of conducting oral history interviews with the former Robben Island political prisoners. In addition, beyond 2003, Ramoupi (2021) conducted additional oral history interviews with this community for his doctoral research and dissertation, and for the writing and co-editing of the 2021 publication book, *Robben Island and Rainbow Dreams: The Making of Robben Island Museum, First Official Heritage Institution of Democratic South Africa*.

Thus, the scholarship and the related literature review on Robben Island are extensive and will be shortened for this paper and space. A doctoral dissertation by Fran Buntman, *The Politics of Conviction: Political Prisoner Resistance on Robben Island, 1962-1991, and its Implications for South African Politics and Resistance Theory* (1997), whose focused periodisation was the same as Ramoupi’s doctoral dissertation. Buntman’s dissertation was revised and published as a book in 2003, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*. Buntman (1997) made a very compelling contribution to the prison literature on Robben Island, and it was then that Ramoupi (2013) wrote the dissertation – the most contemporary work on the Robben Island Prison subject. The emphasis in Buntman’s (1997) research study is on the resistance tactics that were used by the political prisoners to combat and challenge the prison authorities. Buntman (1997) achieves this with distinction by showing the power and strength of the freedom fighters’ resistance and how a number of these former political prisoners took the reins of power in post-apartheid government, business and academe, including the presidency of the country and ruling party, Rolihlahla Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC), respectively.

Just as was the case with the work before Ramoupi’s, oral history interviews were the research method used to gather data on Robben Island Prison because, for the entire apartheid government ruling, everything about Robben Island and its political and criminal prisoners was illegal to print or communicate. Thus, to comprehend Robben Island, the best option was to conduct oral history interviews with all who had an association with the Robben Island Prison, be it the prisoners or the prison wardens and their families who visited them and lived with them on the Island village.

The archives played a role towards understanding what happened on Robben Island Prison. For example, at the core of that comprehension is the Robben Island Archives, which is documentation that contains what the political prisoners, through their incarceration on the Robben Island Prison, were able to document and archive; it is a primary source of fascinating materials housed by the Mayibuye Archives at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in Bellville, Cape Town. In the Robben Island Archives:

This annual report 'outlined the tasks, difficulties, and challenges that developed from disagreement among the prisoners as to the process for choosing and playing [music] records, to the warders' obstruction of their procedures, to protecting and enlarging the record collection (Buntman 2003:70).

In addition to the dominant use of the above-mentioned Oral History Collection of the Robben Island Museum (RIM), Ramoupi employed the following archival holdings: his PhD research oral history interviews that were conducted to fill the gaps that he had identified with the RIM Memories Project of the Robben Island Museum Oral History Interviews, and the oral history interviews that he conducted for the research of *Robben Island Rainbow Dreams book* (Ramoupi, Odendaal, Solani & Mpumlwana 2021).

In the post-apartheid period, the first four African presidents of liberated South Africa, Rohlala Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, Kgalema Motlanthe and Gedlayihlekisa Jacob Zuma, have a deep association with Robben Island Prison. All except Thabo Mbeki were political prisoners on the island; and Govan Mbeki, Thabo Mbeki's father, was with Mandela, Motlanthe and Zuma in Robben Island Prison. All have prioritised the writing and rewriting of the history of South Africa, particularly its African liberation struggle history. As a result, the Mandela presidency established the Robben Island Museum in 1997 and declared that "The memory of what happened there must be preserved.

Robben Island should be developed as a museum where the people's history is preserved... a place for archives... It is too important to be turned into a mere tourist resort" (Mandela 1997). In 1998, *The South African Democracy Education Trust* (SADET 2004) and its Oral History Project "was established after President Thabo Mbeki indicated his concern about the paucity of historical records chronicling the arduous and complex road to South Africa's peaceful political settlement after decades of violent conflict" (The Road to Democracy in South Africa 1960-1970). The SADET project, whose research team Ramoupi was fortunate to join as a researcher in October 2007, has now published more than 10 volumes of the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa and in solidarity with the African and African diaspora alliances.

The SADET volumes are significant for many reasons. The first is that the majority of the contributors are young, upcoming African and black South African scholars from previously discriminated communities. Secondly, the editor-in-chief of the SADET project was the eminent Professor Emeritus in Anthropology at the University of Connecticut, Bernard Magubane (1989), who has an extensive publishing record. His most widely read works include *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa; The Making of a Racist State: British Imperialism and the Union of South Africa, 1875-1910; and (edited with Ibbo Mandaza) Whither South Africa?*

When President Mandela voluntarily left the presidency of the country and the ruling party, the ANC, after serving just one term, a historic moment in African politics and since 1994, none of South African presidents of the ANC or the country followed in his footsteps. Mandela established *The Nelson Mandela Centre for Memory and Dialogue at The Mandela Foundation* in Houghton, Johannesburg, which served as his post-presidency office. The centre is an exciting archive, and in April 2005, Ramoupi visited the Centre's exhibition titled "446/64 – The Prisoner in the Garden," at Constitution Hill in Braamfontein, Gauteng. The prisoner referred to in the exhibition was Mandela, in rare footage from the Prison Services Archives shot during his imprisonment on Robben Island in 1977. The exhibition was fascinating and illustrated both the pettiness of the apartheid project and the breathtaking hubris of its architects and agents. Eventually, this exhibition resulted in the publication of a book, *A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive* in 2005 (Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005). When Ramoupi returned from his PhD studies at Howard in the USA in August 2006, he had the privilege to work for the Mandela Foundation from September 2006 to May 2007; and he got a rare moment in a lifetime to meet Mandela on 3 October 2006, a colossal event in African history. Quoting Ramoupi (2006) about his meeting with Mandela, "meeting Nelson Mandela was coming face to face with African history."

After the tea-break, the archivist, Thabang Khanye, presented Session 2 that covered and addressed the following: "Sources of Evidence", "Types of Sources", "Information Agencies", "Importance and Role of Archives", "Archaeological Evidence", "Primary Sources", "Secondary Sources", "Validity", "Relevance", "Reliability" and "Bias."

It became evident that oral history methodology and methods have been relied on in Lesotho and beyond.

## 5 Oral history research in Lesotho

The reliance on oral history as a research methodology has been in practice for a long time in historical and heritage studies. Oral history methods have been used in numerous historical studies in both Lesotho and South Africa. This section

discusses the practical experiences of Ralebitso in several oral history studies conducted in Lesotho. Ralebitso started by mentioning that her first experience with oral history methods was in 2009 when she conducted research towards her bachelor's dissertation (Ralebitso 2009). In this study, she interviewed a pair of three people who contested land ownership rights over a piece of land.

Secondly, as a research assistant in Dr Munyaradzi Mushonga's PhD thesis, Ralebitso conducted interviews with community members who were identified as informants in this study (Mushonga 2017). The study's focus was on the relationships between a university and the community in Africa, and Ralebitso served as an interpreter for the principal researcher, as he did not speak Sesotho. As a local person, language was not a barrier between the informants and her. As the interpreter, she later transcribed and translated the interviews.

Furthermore, Ralebitso's involvement in oral history research intensified between 2017 and 2019, during which she conducted oral interviews with seven individuals for her master's dissertation (Ralebitso 2020). These were the residents of the Mathebe village who experienced traumatic suffering during the 1970 state of emergency in Lesotho. Part of this work has been published in the 2021 Oral History Association of South Africa (OHASA) conference proceedings, where, as Ralebitso a master's student, presented and submitted an article focusing on testimonies exclusively from women (Ralebitso 2021). The 1970 state of emergency in Lesotho was extensively written about by Khaketla (1971), who wrote what he knew, saw, read about, and experienced during that challenging time, from a prominent political leader's perspective.

Regarding community participation in oral history research, several protocols were followed before and during the interviews in Mathebe. In relation to the research in Mathebe, Ralebitso sought ethical clearance from the Department of Historical Studies at the NUL, where she was a student and was granted a letter before undertaking the study. This letter was presented to the local authorities, such as the chief of the Mathebe village and the informants, and it introduced the researcher. Ralebitso was then authorised by the chief to conduct research in the village, where she was introduced at a public gathering and later directed to the right people to talk to for the study. The study relied on primary and secondary sources such as 1970 newspaper reports and clippings, dissertations, and published books found at various archival institutions in Lesotho to gain insight into the context. The archival institutions visited included: the Morija Museum and Archives (MMA), the NUL Archives, the Royal Archives and Museum (RAM), and the Free State Provincial Archives.

Oral history methodology is equally important in the heritage sector. This stems from the work carried out while Ralebitso was the manager of the Royal Archives and Museums in Matsieng, Lesotho, where she was seconded as a volunteer coordinator to the Seriti sa Makhoarane Heritage and Tourism Network (SSM). Between July 2020 and June 2022, SSM hosted eight apprentices who were graduates of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Lesotho, majoring in architecture and construction management, heritage, history, and tourism management. Each pair was assigned to four key heritage sites, namely: Makeneng, Matsieng, Morija, and Phahameng. Those assigned to Makeneng and Matsieng were placed under the supervision of RAM, while those assigned to Morija and Phahameng were under the supervision of MMA. These are the two heritage institutions found in Makhoarane, and they have played supervisory and implementation roles in SSM activities due to the lack of funding necessary to have a management team for the initiative.

The apprentices' key duties included mapping specific heritage sites found in Makhoarane. In late 2022, a dedicated oral history project on locating the royal houses of the 26 wives of Paramount Chief Lerotholi was planned and implemented. This project encompassed interviews with the living descendants of Paramount Chief Lerotholi, who were older and had been given knowledge by their forebears about the history of the site. About five informants were interviewed, aged above 70, male and female. Through this study, about 40 of the royal houses were identified. Most of these houses were in ruins, while a few were still standing. Through the Geographic Information System (GIS), the coordinates of the royal houses were plotted on the GIS app. In the case of oral history research feeding into the mapping of heritage sites, the apprentices were presented to the local authorities, who in turn called a public gathering where they were introduced to the community. The village steering committees became the constant link between the supervisor, the apprentices, and the informants. Emanating from this work, one of the apprentices (Sekata 2023) later published a book entitled "Lerotholi Lekena Letsie Moshoeshoe", a biographical work focusing on the Paramount Chief Lerotholi, the grandson of Moshoeshoe I, and his heritage site at Makeneng.

She maintained that, in all these studies, she learnt that one of the first steps in engaging communities in oral history research was to have ethical clearance, especially in academic research. She mentioned that it becomes easy when the communities know the researcher through the letter of introduction that they present to the local authorities, who, in turn, authorise him/her to carry out oral history research in their areas. They are willing to share their knowledge.

Concerning the use of a recording device in oral history research, Ralebitso realised that most of the informants in the different studies she was a part of, were nervous about having their voices recorded on devices. Some even went as far as to say that they were afraid that their conversation may be played live on the radio or misused somehow. She mentioned that, for her master's dissertation, the interviews were recorded on the recording device by the researcher, with the permission of the informants. Six interviews were recorded on the recording device, that is, the researcher's smartphone

while one interview was recorded by hand or taking notes, as this particular informant had mentioned that preferred not to be recorded on a recording device, and the researcher obliged.

Concerning what happens after the completion of oral history research, as a researcher, Ralebitso feels tormented by the feeling of the lack of community benefit. This is because Ralebitso's main mission was to secure the qualification, and after completing her research, she went back and submitted her research work to the Department of Historical Studies. Each respondent was handed a copy of the dissertation, and other copies were deposited at the library, which then made this information accessible to other users. However, due to the lack of libraries or museums in areas such as Mathebe village, where this research was conducted, this information does not benefit the local population. The big question then looms, "What can be done to ensure communities benefit from the oral history research?" What role can we, as researchers, play to ensure that young people know the history of their villages, despite that history being a 'sad history'.

On the day of the main conference held at Thaba Bosiu Cultural Village, Ralebitso provided comments on the session entitled 'Why preserve?', from a student's or researcher's perspective. Ralebitso mentioned that as researchers, libraries, archives, and museums provide the necessary information for their work, as they rely on it as empirical evidence from which their arguments depart. Ralebitso, therefore, urged professionals working in these institutions to continue collecting, preserving, presenting and sharing with the users what they have in their collection. She further appealed to the government to prioritise heritage preservation for the sustainability of their communities and to enable knowledge sharing because the lack of financial support for libraries, archives, and museums will lead to the lack of knowledge generation and production.

## 6 South African oral history research

The genesis of Neo Lekgotla Laga Ramoupi's two cases of using oral history methodology for his master's dissertation (1998), on the-work-experience conducting of oral history (2003 – 2006) and using that data collection of these oral history interviews for his PhD dissertation (2013), are the uMnini Trust of 1858 in Natal at the then University of Natal, Durban (UND), on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the RIM Memories Project on Robben Island in Cape Town. That was followed by writing a doctoral dissertation at Howard University in Washington, DC, USA.

In the case of "The amaThuli and the Mnini Trust: A Documentary and Oral History" (Ramoupi 1999), Ramoupi had the privilege to interview, among others, Inkosi Phathisizwe Philbert Luthuli, who is the current Inkosi of the AmaThuli chieftainship, in Mkababa, in the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal, 30 kilometres from Durban, where the AmaThuli were forcefully removed by the Government of Natal in 1858 when their land on the Bluff was earmarked for the establishment of the City of D'urban, so written at the time (Schoute-Vanneck 1958).

The objective of using the 1858 case study was to show the continuing significance of oral history as a methodology in the 21st century. Between 2014 to 2016 and still ongoing, Nkosi Luthuli of the AmaThuli brought before the Land Claims Court of South Africa the Bluff land of his ancestors from which they were forcefully removed in 1858 by the colonial Natal Government of the time (Land Claims Court of SA 2016). Labouring on this point and case of 1858, Ramoupi communicated that this uMnini Trust of 1858 is a historical case because it is evidence enough to prove that the African people in South Africa lost their land long before the Native Land Act of 1913, which the post-apartheid government of the ANC has made this 1913 cut-off date for land claims and land restitution cases in the post-1994 democratic dispensation. During the years 2014 to 2016, Ramoupi was contacted by the advocates in their preparations for the court cases on land claims and restitution, after finding that Ramoupi was the researcher and MA thesis author on the AmaThuli and uMnini Trust of 1858. In the NUL workshop on oral history in Lesotho, Ramoupi communicated how he tried unsuccessfully to exploit these calls by the advocates who requested his research data on the AmaThuli people so that they could use it as evidence in their court cases. They just told him, "Okay, if you do not want to help us personally, we will just go to the Malherbe Library at the UKZN University campus in Durban (where Ramoupi studied towards his master's) and just copy your MA thesis!" (Ramoupi 2014; Ramoupi 2016)

Other than Ramoupi earning his master's degree in history (Ramoupi 1999) by doing this oral history research on the AmaThuli and the uMnini Trust of 1858, he did not know at the time of doing his research, interviewing the AmaThuli people, including their Inkosi Luthuli, in Mkababa, south coast of Durban, that in the 21st century, the advocates working on their land claims and land restitution cases in South African legal fraternity would call him, bring him into their service and make arguments based on Ramoupi's master's thesis to make the points that African people experienced land dispossession long before the advent of the Native Land Act of 1913. As the question of land has not been resolved in the 30 years of ANC rule in South Africa, Ramoupi intends to return to his master's research on the uMnini Trust of 1858 to write article for a book on the "Land Question in South Africa Thirty Years After Apartheid" (Molomo & Dube 2024).

The RIM Memories Project of Oral History Interviews with the former political prisoners on Robben Island Maximum Security Alcatraz of the apartheid State in South Africa during the National Party rule and reign was Ramoupi's the second case study.

By bringing to the oral history workshop presentation, the oral history interviews of former President of the Republic of South Africa, Kgalema Motlanthe, and that of Ahmed Kathrada, President Mandela's friend and confidant of more than 50 years of activism – both before and after Robben Island Prison, Ramoupi was trying to share with the participants that even some of the most experienced oral historians like himself, make mistakes when conducting oral history interviews; but because these interviews are recorded and/or filmed (like these two), one can learn from the errors committed doing those oral interviews. Secondly as Ramoupi did, one can use them as case studies when one teaches research methodology of oral history. Participants were going to listen to how Ramoupi and Lekgetho Makola (Ramoupi & Makola 2016), the cameraman who filmed these two interviews, behaved and conducted themselves well during the two interviews. Basically, the participants were going to be asked to critique the oral history interviews and inform how they would have conducted these interviews differently; what is it that they viewed as wrong that should not be done when recording and filming oral history interviews, and what they would not change, seeing these as good aspects in those interviews' recordings.

So many aspects were brought into the collection of the RIM Memories Project; there is not adequate space to mention them all in this paper (Ramoupi 2025), but the one aspect Ramoupi touched on was the release forms. The museum had its own formulated release forms, but when the heritage team that hosted the EPP (ex-political prisoners) Reference Groups that brought groups of the former Robben Island political prisoners to the Island for the oral history interviews' data gathering about Robben Island, they would almost certainly change the release forms to suit their preferences. Remember, this is their intellectual property (IP), knowledge produced by the history of the prison that was Robben Island. The leadership of the museum allowed that this process should be a two-way process that benefits the institution, the RIM, and the political prisoners. Additions they would make in the release form included something related to their families' access to their oral history interviews – even after they have passed away. The museum should never think of charging fees to their children for wanting to have access and knowing the lived history on the Island prison of their father, uncle, brother, grandfather, husband, boyfriend, partner, and so on. This was, at all times, the most moving because the museum and the heritage team could see, feel and hear how the community of Robben Island political prisoners hold dear their memories of their incarceration in this prison.

The other aspect they would alter on the RIM's release form is the section relating to whom, other than their immediate and extended families, should have access to their oral history interviews collection. All groups (they entered the prison in groups, which during their imprisonment were called "Spans" from the Afrikaans word for "Groups") without exception said they would like their "memories to be used for educational purposes and not for profit." (RIM Memories Project 2000).

These few examples illustrate that even in the 21st century era that we are living in, we cannot afford not to use the methodologies of oral history in our research, especially with the contemporary calls globally and on the African continent to decolonise and Africanise the university and schooling curricula across the disciplines. This is more critically required because the African knowledge production has been marginalised and ignored as if it did not exist simply because it is either oral – not written – or is in the African languages that most of those who documented the knowledge about Africa did not understand, including Lesotho and South Africa that are the focus of Ramoupi and Ralebitso's paper.

## 7 Feedback from the workshop attendees

The following comments were made:

- a) It would seem that the knowledge generated through oral history research benefits those who have access to the library, and access to this knowledge is limited by the lack of knowledge in people from the rural areas, whose history has been documented and stored in libraries, archives and museums.
- b) To circumvent the above challenge and to ensure that young people benefit from this knowledge, it was recommended that the professionals in production could work together with app developers or multimedia practitioners to reach a wider audience.

## 8 Results

There are numerous findings from this study. These are presented below:

- a) The unique purpose and outcome of the oral history methods in historical and heritage studies is the ability to unearth less-talked-about, unpublished, unrepresented, marginalised, and ignored stories or the stories of the minority that have been excluded from literature. For instance, the previously published literature on Robben Island has largely centred on the experiences of prominent politicians – former political prisoners on Robben Island Prison such as the late Nelson Mandela, at the exclusion of the hundreds of ordinary political prisoners across the ideological divides, as if their imprisonment was less important than those of the more famous political prisoners in

the same prison and during the same decades or years. The experiences or stories of ordinary political prisoners had been excluded as though they did not happen. Thus, the RIM Memories Project which Ramoupi worked on between 2000 and 2003 when he resigned from the museum, intentionally addressed and filled the gap by conducting oral history interviews with the ordinary political prisoners, especially of the Pan Africanist Congress of Azania (PAC) and of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). The question, though, that we could not avoid asking ourselves is: "Was it because they did not become famous like former President Mandela that they were not initially selected to be interviewed?" or "Can this be attributed to the selectivity that characterises history?" Similarly, the oral history interviews conducted in Mathebe village focused on ordinary people who were merely supporters of the BCP, and the study showed that they suffered during the 1970 state of emergency. What has been published are testimonies from prominent politicians about how they were imprisoned during the 1970 state of emergency. Thus, these oral history research methods have been used to tell or write the history of the minorities.

- b) Oral history research methodology and methods play and continue to play a vital role in generating knowledge for archives and libraries in Lesotho, South Africa, and elsewhere. This is because this knowledge would otherwise have resided in the minds of the informants, but has been made available to a wider audience to consume. The recordings of the interviews are or should be deposited in a place of safekeeping like an archive, so that they can later be accessed by other users. The recordings of the interviews conducted for the master's dissertation by Ralebitso in Lesotho have been deposited at RAM in Matsieng, where she worked as the manager. In an ideal world, this would also have been made available to the informants and deposited at the local or community library in Mathebe, but such a facility does not exist. On the other hand, a copy of the master's dissertation has been given to the NUL Library and can be found in the archives section and in the NUL theses and dissertations repository.
- c) Oral history research methodology and methods are equally important in heritage studies. Information that would otherwise remain unknown when it comes to the preservation, presentation, interpretation, and promotion of a heritage site can be acquired through the use of interviews with local community members or the victims. As seen in Makhoarane, where the mapping of the Makeneng heritage site, associated with Paramount Chief Lerotholi, the grandson of King Moshoeshoe I, involved interviews with the descendants of Chief Lerotholi namely: 'M'e Lipolelo Lerotholi, nkono 'Mamoshoeshoe Lerotholi, ntate Malefane Lerotholi, and others.
- d) It indicated who have to ensure the recreation and sharing of knowledge kept in archives and libraries, and through regulated access and following standard ethical practices related to research, access can be granted to people who are in production. This will ensure that knowledge sharing is not only made available to archives and libraries users but to the wider community and incorporates digital technologies that cater for all age groups.
- e) The AmaThuli people's oral history interviews were also conducted with the descendants of Nkosi uMnini, who was the Chief of the AmaThuli when they were forcefully removed from the Bluff land of their ancestors by the newly established city of D'urban in 1858 when the Natal Government gave them a trust, uMnini Trust of 1858, which allocated a replacement land in Mkababa on the south coast, 30 kilometres from Durban, where they originated. However, these interviews with a generation that was almost 200 years removed from the time when their ancestors were dispossessed of their Bluff land, through unwritten oral history methodology, which was just passed down by word of mouth, from one generation to the next, could still share the history of their people, AmaThuli.

## 9 Conclusion

This article has shown the significance of oral history methodologies and methods in generating knowledge for libraries, archives, and museums in the 21st century. From the participants' or contributors' experiences, it was found that oral history research methodology is an intense work that requires commitment from the researcher and the informants, and the respect of the informants by the researchers concerning their time, confidentiality and anonymity.

Regardless of the form, for instance voice recordings, tapes, films, and transcriptions, oral history eventually end up in archives as copies that are deposited in such facilities or as written books, unpublished works that are kept in libraries and information that feeds into the interpreted information on displayed museum items. Ramoupi and Ralebitso conclude that oral history methodologies and methods have been relied on for centuries and are significant in research and generating knowledge in libraries, archives, and museums. Africa's heritage and history can never afford to exclude this methodology, particularly because most African people, especially the elderly, continue to be oral communicators and not writing communicators.

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