

Oral History Workshop in Indonesia

Report >
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Conducting oral history has often been strongly associated with an attempt to bring undocumented voices into the picture, to provide another angle in contrast to official history, and to counter accounts and interpretations of events constructed by the ruling elite. The recent Oral History Workshop in Indonesia was meant to be a training workshop to prepare participants for their own interviews, meaning that much attention was given to basic interview techniques and various interview situations.

By Ratna Saptari

With support from the Open Society Institute, CLARA (Changing Labour Relations in Asia), in collaboration with the Realino Study Institute in Yogyakarta, organized a workshop aimed to start off a joint oral history project in Indonesia which will consist of a number of sub-projects covering the areas of Aceh; North Sumatra; West Kalimantan; West and South Sumatra; West, Central and East Java; and Jakarta. These sub-projects will focus on specific social groups such as victims of violence; people in conflict areas; factory workers and labour organizers; peasants and peasant activists, and ethnically marginalized groups. Twenty-eight participants from various NGOs and research institutes in Java and Sumatra, one participant from Burma and three participants from KITLV and IISH in the Netherlands attended the workshop. The Realino Study Institute in Yogyakarta provided a most amenable venue for the intensive discussions.

The questions posed within the group emphasized the need to look at epistemological questions concerning the creation of sources; whether to look at oral history as an approach or method, how to deal with the 'dilemmatic' relationship between interviewer and interviewee and how to analyse the link between micro- and macro-histories (or whether or not to link them in the first place). Since most of the participants already had a long-standing relationship with their informants either as activists or as researchers, questions were framed around their existing experiences and the direction of their future research plans. There was certainly no more need to emphasize the importance of collecting oral histories of the people they were working with, since all of them felt the need to conduct interviews to 'dig up the past'. However, the feeling was generally shared that this did not immediately pave the way to a better knowledge of clear-cut methods of inquiry and interviewing, let alone how to deal with the multiple roles in which researchers and their informants find themselves. These and many other questions were raised in the extended period (six days) that the participants discussed the complex issues of conducting oral history.

Oral History as 'Alternative History'?

Throughout the discussions there was a sense of bringing in something 'new', namely the writing of an 'alternative history'. Although the terms 'alternative' or 'competing' (*tandingan*) were mentioned a number of times, under more critical scrutiny they were considered unsatisfactory. In part this could be attributed to the fact that individual or micro-histories might not be 'alternative' in the sense that they can challenge or are different from the official national history. The complex and often ambiguous relationship of the individual to the larger structures and events rendered such a notion too simple and therefore inadequate. However, various inten-

tions and aims of the researchers, expressed in the first days of the workshop, reflected some of the ambivalences, not only of the link between the individual and larger structures but also of the role of the researcher, of linking the past with the present. For instance, the idea that men and women 'know their own history' or that 'knowledge of the past is important for strategies of mobilization' or that the knowledge pertaining to 'the nature of repression' and of 'collective identities' will allow a better understanding and therefore provide a better basis for the creation of new political strategies were some of the underlying aims of the participants of the workshop. For most of them, an understanding of how individuals perceived history and what happened during certain important historical events became more a means to give meaning to the present rather than to re-examine the dynamics of the past. In an attempt to untangle these, the organizers requested a reflection on the different levels of history (national, community, and individual histories) which participants were persuaded to look at. This, however, also brought about a realisation of the intermeshing of different levels of history and experiences, therefore often making the boundaries ineffective.

In looking at the periods that the participants wanted to cover, it was rather inevitable that most were interested in recent history – with the establishment, or the period leading up to the establishment of Suharto's regime and ultimately, its demise. Each person dealing with a specific period, the necessity to highlight micro-histories was apparent. There was a clear understanding of the necessity to interview people at different levels to capture the diversity of experiences. For instance, those interested in the ex-political prisoners wanted to look at the party members, cadres and non-cadres but also the family members; those interested in factory workers and peasants would look at leaders, members of unions and non-members; those interested in women wanted to look at 'ordinary women', members of organizations and those who play important cultural roles. Some saw individual lives as shaped and defined by events and structures, others saw individuals and groups as having their own logic, their own repertoires of resistance and cultural grids to deal with them. Should we look at oral history to gain a better knowledge of the facts or should we attempt to understand the perceptions that people have regarding those 'facts'?

The Orality in Oral History

There were questions on whether oral history was purely a method of collecting information or whether it was a separate approach. Indeed, it was stressed that the major factor distinguishing oral history from other types of history was its oral nature and this therefore confronts the historian with the problem of dealing with subjective accounts and narratives. The question of objectivity and subjectivity brought an animated discussion regarding whether there were boundaries between them. In one instance, objectivity was somewhat vaguely associated with rigorous procedures of scientific research and there was also a sense that 'subjectivity' implied haphazard data collecting, i.e. following one's own whims. The oral nature of the information also meant that the researcher should be able to capture the multiple signals manifested in the tone and articulation of the speaker, in the use of language and language levels, as well as the use of songs or poetry to convey one's feelings. The various advantages as well as the problems regarding the use of tapes and minidisks were discussed; the distinctions between individual versus group interviews were touched upon.

Anthropologists in particular have long dealt with the problems involved in interviewer-interviewee relationships. These problems emerge when posing of questions, in the pursuance and selection of certain types of information, in the interpretation of narratives. In this workshop, a concern with the problems of the present and attempts to advocate the interests of those lacking power have strongly influenced the framing of the questions that the participants posed. However, this position has not been uncritically examined. For instance, when women interviewers are concerned with the issue of sexual violence and attempt to obtain stories (or testimonies) from women on this topic, they often face painful

silences or become entangled in working out of emotional traumas. The question was raised as to how far an interviewer could pursue a topic further to obtain the required information. Also, when a researcher is faced with stereotypes and biases held by the informants with regard to other social groups, to what extent could researchers steer the conversation in such a way as to neutralize such views or to raise their solidarity towards the groups they are biased against? All of us were aware of the precarious balance existing between the need to listen and the urge to direct the conversation. Although there were no definite answers to these questions, the posing of such questions was a useful reminder to us all.

In the same way that interviews are saturated with ambivalent and complex relations between researcher and informant, the question of interpretation is equally thorny. We have to grapple with interpreting the kinds of answers informants give, in the categories they use, and in the expressions they make. There was mention of 'fossil stories': standard answers which are repeatedly provided by informants, and which may manifest a number of different things. These fossil stories may either be meta-narratives, which have been internalized by informants; they may be mechanisms to avoid dealing with their own emotions, or instruments to prevent researchers from getting into their innermost thoughts, a reflection of the social distance with those who attempt to enter 'their world'. This naturally brings up the major question of the nature of memory; various factors are involved in attempting to 'jog one's memory', a topic which would be worthy of another workshop. The way we interpret the answers may also hinge on the way we see the link between individuals and their cultural repertoire.

Documenting and Reproducing Oral Histories

Another set of problems emerged when we discussed how the sources would be kept and made accessible to a broader public. Since interviews would be taped and stored in minidisks, three major issues came up: where to store the tapes, secondly how to safeguard the identity of the informants but at the same time, and thirdly, how to make the information accessible to the general public.

These issues were not yet resolved in the workshop, but as for storage, the tapes were to be deposited in a still to be determined place in Jakarta and in the respective organizations of which the researchers were part. In total at least three copies would be made of each interview, two to be kept in Indonesia and one copy in the Netherlands (at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam). Applying strict procedures in concealing the identity of the informants, if required, would safeguard their security. The production of films and novels, on the basis of interviews, are topics on the agenda for the near future and were only briefly touched upon. The participants were primarily concerned with how to start the project and how the interviews were to be conducted. What is to be done with the interviews is also a subject for later discussion, tentatively in November of this year. ◀

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