

Tim Nicholson, *History* (2016)

In my fourth year of graduate school, full of optimism after having my dissertation prospectus approved, I arrived in Tanzania for a combination of archival and field research, ready to examine the interlinked topics of education and state-building. Over the next nine months and on two subsequent research visits, I dealt with power outages and lost documents in the archive but the most frustrating yet rewarding part of the research was conducting oral histories with the first generation of postcolonial Tanzanian teachers and students.

Speaking poor Swahili and in search of contacts (often asking my interviewees for additional references), I quickly realized the difficulty in establishing myself and explaining my intentions with the interviewees—even with an interpreter, personal recommendations, and after explaining the underlying project. Simply getting people to respond to my requests and provide enlightening anecdotes of their experiences proved challenging. Additionally, I was asking people about their created memories and having them share those memories with me. Thus, in addition to anyone else in the room, I, as an outside academic with a specific agenda and power, was at risk of actively shaping their performance and recollections. Consequently, my initial interviews were awkward and of limited value as my questions were often either too vague or specific and generally were of limited value. Although hampered by these factors, each subsequent interview proved to be less awkward than the previous ones and the responses improved. My own initial experience reflects that of many historians who quickly realize their lack of the necessary formal training in the interview process. While such deficiencies appear to be diminishing, most graduate courses still focus on interpreting archival based sources while the more non-traditional sources largely remain ignored.

Other factors influenced my research and demonstrate larger concerns related to conducting oral histories. Wanting my interviewees to focus on a single decade was problematic. I quickly realized that the answers given during the interview reflected the broader life experiences of my subjects. The economic and political chaos that plagued Tanzania during the 1980s and 1990s frequently shaped the answers of people responding to my questions pertaining to the 1960s. In comparison to these later decades, most students and teachers remembered the 1960s with nostalgia and overlooked many of the early state-building problems. Additionally, the urban location where most of the interviews were conducted, selected by myself for ease and access, reflected the now elite status enjoyed by many of my subjects. Over the last forty years, many of those who studied abroad in the late 1950s and 1960s returned home and achieved success in their respective fields of study, and are closely linked with the government or elite educational institutions and live in the economic and political center of the country. Those who failed to graduate from secondary school typically remain in the more rural areas and were outside the social circles of my now-elite informants.

Despite the warnings mentioned above, I contend oral histories provide a valuable method of examining and recovering events that occurred in the recent past and remain

instrumental in my own research. For my dissertation and upcoming book project, the stories from my interviewees, which highlighted students' determination to study abroad and life experiences, are reflective of the several thousand students who received foreign scholarships during this period. Overall, I conducted over 40 interviews in Tanzania and Kenya. The interviewees yielded insight into the processes of obtaining foreign scholarships, encounters with foreign governments and the personal ties with the Cold War while studying abroad during the 1950s and 1960s. I used oral histories as an important complement to documents retrieved from the British, American and East African national archives and worked to cross-reference them with textual sources in an attempt to blunt inherent biases.

Oral histories remain an important source that can serve as a corrective to national archives and state based histories. Sources reflect a specific viewpoint, are constructed by the holders of state power and can be altered to fit specific agendas, questions or concerns. Additionally, many groups are simply ignored by the state and archival sources simply do not exist. In my own field, colonial records are especially limited when examining the voice of the colonized and, while other sources such as court records provide important insight, they remain limited by their scope and focused on areas of contestation and dispute.

More broadly in the field of history along with other social sciences, oral histories become especially useful when dealing with subaltern groups. The examination of survivor testimony in Holocaust studies has worked to reshape that particular historical field. For example, by using victim testimonies as historical documents, Christopher Browning's *Remembering Survival* shifts analyses from perpetrator motivation to the actions of the imprisoned and develops a new outlook on the Holocaust. Browning also provides insight into the methodologies of oral histories including how group interactions can shape individual narratives. Additionally, Indian history is an example where the vast majority of the population, especially peasants, women, and children did not create written records and were largely ignored in state records. Incorporating their oral histories into research efforts and highlighting their actions allows such events as the Partition of India in 1947 to be rewritten. Although millions played a role in the process of partition and were directly impacted by this monumental event—as refugees, victims or perpetrators of violence, kidnappers of women, rioters, or early state-builders—they became consumed with forgetting the past. As scholars of Indian history have recently realized, many of the oral histories now being presented are new and unique with many coming from witnesses who had never told their stories before. Finally, in an article I am completing which deals with pregnant Tanzanian students, I examine a population largely ignored in the sources and to raise questions about the creation of a national culture from the perspective of a marginalized demographic.

Students of history or the social sciences can readily involve themselves in developing their own oral histories. This allows students to be actively involved in the process of creating historical documents and forces students to think more critically as to how historical sources actually are developed. Finally, oral histories also provide a link to living history which is much

more engaging than traditional sources and can allow students to experience history from a more bottom-up perspective rather than just focusing on the political elites.