

INTERNATIONAL WORK

AFRICA

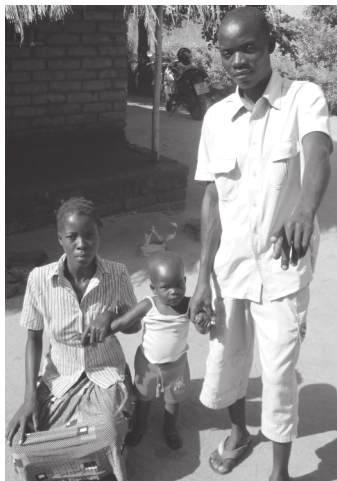
MALAWI

Becoming Fathers

Laura Mitchison and Dr Fiona Parrott introduce 'Becoming Fathers: Reproductive journeys in Malawi'. This dual-language website and digital exhibition distils 233 hours of life history interviews exploring Malawian men's dreams and experiences of having children. These interviews were recorded as part of a four-year (2011-2015) research project designed to contextualise and share the reproductive health concerns experienced by people in Karonga District, a rural area in the north of Malawi. A print version of the exhibition will be displayed at the Africa Studies Centre in Leiden, the Netherlands, from April 2016.

'Interviews were conducted in Chitumbuka (the participants' mother tongue). For Chitumbuka communities the compliment "man of strength" links being a man with high fertility and sexual prowess. "Becoming Fathers" challenges this stereotype by exploring rural Malawian men's dreams and experiences of bearing children. The individuals who shared their life stories show there are in fact many ways of being a man and raising a family.

'The "Becoming Fathers" exhibition is structured around ten



This farmer/NGO worker was photographed, aged 26, with his wife, aged 24, and child. His pose references music videos while his respectfully seated wife adopts a more traditional stance. Photo: Becoming Fathers 2015.

themes that recur again and again in the participants' lives. Farmers, fishermen, teachers and skilled labourers reflect on the mixed blessings of adolescent sex, marriage (from elopement to winning the sanction of a girlfriend's suspicious father), coping with infertility and the dilemma posed by "outside" pregnancies. They also explore the search for love, frank communication and respect behind the grim statistics about reproductive misfortunes such as HIV.

'Lead researcher Dr Fiona Parrott, of the University of Amsterdam, laments a (receding) tendency in reproductive health initiatives to treat rural African men as "unthinking pronatalists whose influence should be minimised". By listening to men's unique stories, "Becoming Fathers" aims to explode such reductive categorisation.

'In the website, we wanted to show the variety of ways men encounter reproductive milestones and problems. To this end, the exhibition includes portrait photographs with quotes which highlight moments of transition and decision in individual lives. Participants chose how they wanted to be portrayed, sometimes combining contemporary poses with vernacular styles. For instance, the wife in the picture (left) is respectfully seated, while the husband's pointed finger alludes to music videos. Other portraits highlight significant relationships and signs of achievement like corrugated iron roofs and fishing nets.

'The website and exhibition present a nuanced picture of men's journeys. Becoming a man and a father is a life-long high-wire act in rural Malawi. It requires the co-operation of kinsmen (who provide funds to secure a man's right to his children), and wives

(who must be willing to care for siblings and nephews). Many years before having their own biological children, men become fathers to nephews and younger siblings who are sent to their house for care or simply a richer field of experience. As one childless tailor puts it, “My elder brother’s children are also my children”, choosing to be photographed with his niece whom he buys clothes for. So, the experience of fatherhood transcends the biological. For others, the pain of infertility is intense: “If we can compare a gift of a child and a vehicle – you find that the person who is valued is the one having a child. If he doesn’t have a child he doesn’t become settled, even if he is rich.”

‘Men also reflect on how they are pulled in different directions by church, finance, partners, family and public health initiatives. Reactions to the latter include laughter at “doing gender equality”, nervous welcome of joint HIV testing and incredulity: “You can’t sit on the chair watching your wife in great pain as she gives birth!”

‘The research was funded by the NWO-WOTRO Innovational Research Incentives Scheme. Ethical approval was granted by the Malawi National Health Sciences Research Committee (NHSRC) and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The website was created by Dr Fiona Parrott and Laura Mitchison on *The Record* in collaboration

with the Karonga Prevention Study, Malawi.’

● Further details: website www.reproductivejourneysinmalawi.org; On the Record, website on the-record.org.uk; Karonga Prevention Study, website www.lshtm.ac.uk/eph/ide/research/kps

SIERRA LEONE

Joseph Ben Kaifala introduces the Sierra Leone Memory Project (SLMP), of which he is co-founder.

‘The Sierra Leone Memory Project commenced in 2012 as an oral history project dedicated to recording testimonies from survivors of the brutal civil war that occurred in Sierra Leone from 1991-2002, including former child soldiers, amputees and rape victims. The project aims to serve as a platform for justice, granting an avenue to the voices and experiences of those who were most affected by the war and continue to be most vulnerable in society. Moreover, it will provide survivors with room for individual healing through reflection and will also help build a collective narrative.

‘The SLMP is a project of the Jeneba Project, a non-profit organisation dedicated to developing leaders in Sierra Leone by providing targeted educational opportunities.

‘The SLMP is about to launch a new website to allow the project more space to make its work

available to the public. The project is also collecting other relevant materials pertaining to the Sierra Leonean conflict and making them available online. Our plan is to gradually post our audio, visual and written testimonies online in order to provide a human-centred perspective to the Sierra Leonean conflict.

‘It is difficult to conduct oral history about traumatic experiences. The Sierra Leonean civil war was one of the most brutal conflicts of the twentieth century and the scars are still recent. During the first phase of the Memory Project, we had a duty to allow participants to tell their stories as they preferred, without badgering them with questions they might not have been ready to answer. We had an open mic approach of asking participants to tell their own stories. The Sierra Leonean conflict was so complicated that some survivors, child soldiers for example, are the embodiments of both victims and perpetrators.

‘The first group of participants expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their stories. We have been able to generate dialogues and discussion regarding memory and remembrance in Sierra Leone. As part of creating an understanding about Sierra Leone and the civil war, Joseph Kaifala is working on a historical narrative to clarify misconceptions about the country and the decade-long conflict.



Left: Alyssa LaPane and Joseph Kaifala preparing to conduct an interview. Right: Amie Mansaray, participant, amputated in Freetown in January 1999. Photos: SLMP.

'The first phase of the project was funded by the Jeneba Project and Humanity in Action, an international educational organisation dedicated to inspiring and connecting a global network of students, young professionals and established leaders committed to promoting human rights, diversity and active citizenship in their own communities and around the world.

'The Jeneba Project is planning on creating a physical space in Sierra Leone to exhibit videos, photographs and testimonies the SLMP has collected. Part of our plan is also to make the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission report accessible to the general public and to generate meaningful dialogues around the conflict and the future of Sierra Leone. Sierra Leoneans have a saying that if we don't know where we are going we should at least know where we came from.'

● Further details: SLMP, website sierraleonememoryproject.org; Jeneba Project, website www.jenebaproject.org; Humanity in Action, website www.humanityinaction.org; Joseph Kaifala, website www.josephkaifala.com

ASIA

Syria Oral History Project

Amer Mahdi Doko of Enab Baladi, a Syrian non-profit media organisation, introduces the Syria Oral History Project.

'In 2014, Enab Baladi conducted oral history interviews with key Syrian individuals based in Turkey. This work was done in collaboration with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, who worked with several other agencies to record fifty-eight oral histories in total.

'The diverse group of Syrians interviewed by Enab Baladi included both men and women who come from several geographical regions of Syria. Altogether there were nineteen interviewees; twelve men and

seven women ranging in age from twenty to forty. They are all survivors of the Syrian conflict who were fortunate enough to flee and move to Turkey as refugees. At the time of interview they were living in Istanbul, Antakya or Gaziantep in Turkey.

'Most of the interviewees were local leaders in their communities, especially during the uprising when they played an important role in the peaceful demonstrations against the Assad regime. Their experiences constitute an important part of the Syrian uprising history as the events they witnessed and the challenges they faced form a salient account of Syria's contemporary history.

'The interviews were centred around the lives of the participants: their early childhood, the surrounding environment, the changes that affected their community, the challenges they faced, their journey fleeing Syria and motives to leave and details of their journey. Interviewees also talked about their lives in Turkey and their experience of following developments in Syria from a distance, as well as their hopes, ambitions and plans for the future.

'The relationship between the different components of Syrian society emerged as the chief concern to interviewees. Most pointed out that – before the uprising – their home country was "a home for all Syrians", and that its social fabric was a "mosaic" that encompassed all sects, religions, and ethnicities. They all highlighted how "coexistence and safety" prevailed in Syrian society; how "friendships" tied its people in their daily life, work and study; and how "warmth, co-operation, mutual respect of religious rituals" and "a shared sense of belonging" marked their relationships.

'However, some did talk about Sunni-Alawite interactions, particularly in the coastal western region, where both communities co-existed. Although sectarian tensions dating back to the 1980s were hidden, discriminatory

policies towards certain groups refuelled those tensions. In general, the sharp distinction between both sects was clear, mostly due to the regime discrimination against Sunnis, as Alawites have been favoured with military positions and jobs regardless of their skills and qualifications. Some of the interviewees themselves were deprived of work and study opportunities due to their families' connections to the Muslim Brotherhood (a Sunni group).

'As an organisation we learned a lot through this initiative, including:

- It is vital to continue this effort and record memories and stories and events that the Syrians have been through during the crisis.
- It is important to give more Syrians the chance to narrate their stories; this type of interview provides a means of sharing their experiences and possibly relieving some of their psychological pain.
- The process of sharing, however, was also an anxious moment of remembrance for some participants. Remembering the intense emotional moments attached to their memories and their beloved ones who were gone or hurt was upsetting for both interviewee and interviewer.
- The relative immediacy of the narrative enriched the interviews with details about events, persons, places and dates.
- During the times of the conflict, oral history could be publicised through media outlets as a means of raising the people's awareness of the reality and the experiences of other fellow citizens.
- Also, oral history could be utilised in the legal and human rights fields as testimonies to reveal truth and to serve justice.
- The testimonies serve as guidance in areas such as peace-building, transitional justice and

Opposite page: In 2015, the Syrian Oral History Project worked with artist Anju Shrestha to illustrate the oral histories. These are available to view at www.sitesofconscience.org/exhibitions/syrian-oral-history-project

MUHAMMAD



AS14

"The revolution started because of a kid who had his fingers cut off by the regime. We demonstrated and many of us were killed and arrested. This went on for months."

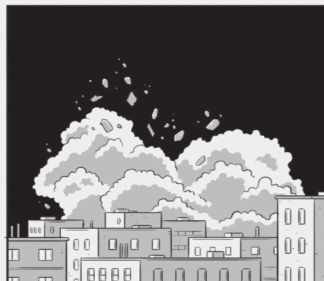
HASNA



AS15

"I was arrested along with my oldest daughter on 14 July, 2012. I was arrested for a year and a half. I only was trying to secure food, medication, and milk for the children."

MOHAMMAD



AS15

"Revenge doesn't preserve the right of people. Only fair trials with national and international standards do. Revenge is not something I seek."

citizen engagement because not only do they uncover events and truth to researchers, but also provide the participants' opinions and ideas on them.

- The project experience enhanced our expertise in conducting interviews and acquiring information with the aim of getting the truth.
- The researchers who analysed the results enriched their human rights and journalistic experience with further stories and testimonies, and thus strengthened their background and ability to cover topics about people living in a conflict.

'We hope to continue to record testimonies from various groups of the affected people in different locations of Syria, and to organise the results in a way that allows direct utilisation of the testimonies, or at least ensures their availability through publications, books, articles, print and/or other media outlets.'

● Further details: website www.sitesofconscience.org/2015/06/syrian-oral-history-project

EUROPE

GREECE

Volos City Museum

Since the creation of the Greek Oral History Association in 2012, oral history has seen an unprecedented development in Greece: local oral history groups mushrooming all over the country, training workshops, conferences and publications. Riki Van Boeschoten, chair of the Greek Oral History Association, introduces an important new development.

'The inauguration in December 2014 of the new City Museum of Volos (Thessaly) has been a significant landmark for oral history in Greece. The museum is almost entirely built around the oral testimonies of the town's citizens. This major development has been made possible by a three-year research programme co-ordinated by the University of Thessaly, entitled "Designing the



Listening to life stories in the museum. Photo: City Museum of Volos.

City Museum of Volos: Historical research and development of innovative interactive content for the dissemination of knowledge" (2012-2015), involving historians, anthropologists, architects and the Municipal History Centre.

'The project was co-funded by the Greek Ministry of Education and the European Commission. The oral history research was coordinated by Riki Van Boeschoten, director of the Laboratory of Social Anthropology and its Archive of Audiovisual Testimonies. The research was organised around major themes that have marked the town's history: cultural diversity (refugees from Asia Minor, migrants, Jews), industrial labour and periods of crisis (1940s, the earthquake of 1955 and the present economic crisis). Altogether 160 life stories were recorded from citizens of all walks of life. In the spirit of the "participatory museum", the research team engaged with a group of citizens, with whom it

organised a series of "memory nights" to collect memories, objects and photographs, to locate interviewees and receive feedback on the ongoing research.

'One of the major contributions of the project was the creation of an interactive database containing interview summaries and excerpts, photos, audio recordings, relevant bibliography and researchers' comments. The database, searchable through keywords, will be available to the Museum and the broader public. The first exhibition focused on the relations between the Asia Minor refugee neighbourhood of Nea Ionia and Volos town and included 900 minutes of audio excerpts accessible through headphones and sound showers. Visitors were especially attracted by a life story room, where people could sit on old school desks and listen to one or more out of twelve selected life stories.

'Future plans include an exhibition on migration, on the history of the town's Jewish and

two sound walks around buildings marked by the turbulent period of the 1940s.'

● Further details: Riki Van Boeschoten, email rvboe@yahoo.gr; Greek Oral History Association website www.epi.uth.gr

NORTH AMERICA

USA

Suzanne Snider serves as founder/director of Oral History Summer School (OHSS) based in Hudson, New York. She is a writer and oral historian who has worked as an interviewer, consultant and trainer for the Museum of Modern Art, Columbia University, HBO Productions, the Center for Reproductive Rights and the Prison Public Memory Project, among others. Here, she reports on OHSS's summer 2015 session.

'Oral History Summer School returned to Hudson, New York in June 2015 to train an international group of professionals – writers, social workers, radio producers, artists, teachers, human rights workers, among others – to make use of oral history in their work and lives. This year, we welcomed over fifty students from around the world – including Turkey, Brazil, Canada and Spain – to study with instructors of oral history and adjacent fields, including radio, music composition, documentary film, social work, ethnomusicology and disability studies.

'We kicked off with an eight-

day Oral History Intensive (12-19 June), an immersive workshop that serves as a rigorous introduction to the field of oral history. The workshop covered interview techniques and technical tutorials, as well as ethics, trauma narratives, archives, song collection, project design, social advocacy and offered opportunities to conduct interviews with longtime area residents. This workshop was taught by Suzanne Snider with guest instruction by Sady Sullivan, Curator of Oral History at Columbia University.

'The Oral History Intensive was followed by two production-focused workshops consistent with OHSS's mission to explore cross-disciplinary work. The first, *Collecting and Composing: Oral History and Music* (23-28 June) focused on repatriation, prison music, radio ballads, song collection, sound healing, ambient sound study and composition. Students collected sounds and songs at various sites, including churches, schools, concerts, a meditation centre, public parks and others spaces in and around Hudson. Visiting instructors included Jeremy Thal (Found Sound Nation), LJ Amsterdam (Watershed Center), Ben Harbert (Georgetown University), Sheri Bauer-Mayorga (Good Globe Singing School), Lavender Suarez and Jeffrey Lependorf (Music Omi International Musicians' Residency). Students also visited

Wave Farm, a sound art residency and study centre. Ben Harbert screened his film *Follow Me Down: Portraits of Louisiana Prison Musicians*.

'Our three-year initiative, a workshop sequence titled *Let Us All Our Voices Raise* (LUAOVR), aims to broaden the range of voices engaged in oral history practice and to support the collection of oral histories from narrators under-represented in our field and in our archives. Our 2015 LUAOVR workshop focused on memory loss and mixed ability interviewing, with the support of guest instructors Dina Zempsky (Storycorps' Memory Loss Initiative) and Niki Pombier Berger (Nothing About Us Without Us). As part of the workshop, students interviewed seniors at Camphill Ghent and life-sharing partners/friends at Camphill Hudson, a residential mixed-ability community in Hudson, New York. These narratives will be included in the area archive, but also used within the community as an entry point to discuss complex dynamics at Camphill.

'The biggest project ahead of us is the continued building of a community archive, centred on 200 recordings, including more than 150 life histories with area residents. The archive is an integral piece of the workshop experience and also serves as a form of reciprocity for the continued generosity of Hudson



Left: Ron Puhalski discusses his experiences at the Stonewall Riots after the audience listens to 'Remembering Stonewall' and a short OHSS radio documentary in collaboration with LGBTQ area youth. Photo: Walter Hergt. Right: Rachel Shulman and Jody Brookes discussed their friendship and life at Camphill Hudson with interviewer Neha Agrawal. Photo: Neha Agrawal.

residents: all those hosts, narrators and residents who welcome workshop participants. So far, the collection gives voice to subjects such as architecture, industrial history, farming, gentrification, family, racial tension, civic spaces and institutions (the prison, library and schools), churches, social clubs and small businesses. We continue to process, index and preserve these oral histories in conversation with archival advisers and the Hudson Area Public Library.'

'For more information on OHSS's 2016 workshops, please sign up for our mailing list at www.oralhistorysummerschool.com/mailling. The Oral History Winter School will return in January 2017.

● Further details: website www.oralhistorysummerschool.com; Camphill Hudson, website www.camphillhudson.org

OCEANIA

AUSTRALIA Indigenous Community Stories

Michelle Broun of the Film and Television Institute (FTI) introduces the Indigenous Community Stories programme, of which she is manager.

'For over forty years, FTI has played a significant role in the cultural development of Western Australia. It is supported by its membership, corporate partners, ScreenWest and Lotterywest, and until recently, Screen Australia. Our mission is to enhance the vibrancy of the screen sector, and support independent filmmakers through a range of activities, events, resources and programmes.

'The Indigenous Community Stories (ICS) programme is an oral history on film project conceptualised by FTI and ScreenWest in consultation with indigenous community members and screen professionals in 2008. It addresses the concerns of Aboriginal cultural leaders who



ICS on location.

expressed great urgency to record and conserve the stories of Aboriginal people, especially elders.

'Aboriginal cultures are the oldest living cultures in the world and based on oral traditions. Many older Aboriginal people are illiterate, and English is sometimes a second, third or even fourth language. Aboriginal elders are the keepers of language, of law and culture, and have an intimate knowledge and understanding of their physical environment. They have retained strong kinship structures and spiritual connections to country. They have survived massacres and harsh government policies of segregation – removed from their families and country. They are ready to record their stories for future generations. Film is the most effective way to gather stories with urgency and the most accessible for future use.

'The Aboriginal Story Owners narrate their own stories. They decide what they will tell, where they will tell it and who else will contribute to their stories. This gives voice to Aboriginal people who for so long have been the subject of stories or had others telling their stories on their behalf.

'The ICS film directors, who in many cases are also Aboriginal,

interview the Story Owners but often guided by a community facilitator and content of the application. All ICS crew are qualified and accredited. The producer and production coordinator are Aboriginal with over forty years' experience in cultural development and film-making between them. The programme is further endorsed through the authority of the ICS Panel of mostly Aboriginal academics, historians, anthropologists and cultural leaders. ICS film crews have covered hundreds of locations. Many language groups and communities are represented. Examples of the stories collected to date can be downloaded from the FTI website.

'Several archival copies of the audio-visual material are created and one of these is delivered to Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and stored at FTI. DVDs are also delivered to the Story Owner/s. These recordings can be used for other purposes such as community events, research, education or film productions. In 2014 and 2015, National Indigenous Television (NITV) broadcast eleven of the stories to national audiences.

'ICS has attracted sponsorship so far totalling \$2.5 million from government and corporate partners. Rio Tinto has been acknowledged as principal partner of ICS from 2012-2015 and has contributed \$1 million over four years; other funders include local government, mining and building contractors and the Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation. FTI and communities have contributed a further \$500,000. With existing funding we will achieve eighty-four stories by early 2016. We are currently fundraising and require substantial funding yet to achieve the original target of 100 stories. 'Contingent on funding, ICS

is on track to complete 100 stories by mid-2017, and we will then enter its films into major national and international film festivals. ICS will also develop and seek funding for a special commemorative project to celebrate ten years and 100 stories, in remembrance of those Story Owners who have passed away. Due to the health status of Aboriginal people in Australia, at least fifteen Story Owners have passed away since they recorded their stories. There is more urgency than ever to record the stories for future generations.

'Finally – storytelling is central to our oral traditions. Our stories reflect who we are. They

strengthen our spirits and connect us to our country. These oral histories are the authentic voice of our people. They are important stories of people who have witnessed and experienced great social change. These recordings will empower our future generations and enlighten the broader community as well.'

● Further details: website www.fti.asn.au/make/icstories, promotional film about ICS <https://vimeo.com/125321473>

International Work is edited by Siobhan Warrington who welcomes all contributions by email to siobhan@oraltestimony.org

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