Oral History and Memory-making in Malaysia

Hanis Diyana Kamarudin[1] and Tom Denison[2]

[1]Faculty of Information Management,
UiTM Selangor Branch, Puncak Perdana Campus, 40150 Shah Alam, Selangor,
Malaysia
[2]Faculty of Information Technology,
29 Ancora Imparo Way (Building 6), Monash University, Clayton Victoria 3800,
Australia

Email: hanisdiyana@uitm.edu.my

Abstract. The shortage of written documentation from previous authorities and colonial powers in Malaysia has accelerated the need for oral history as a method to capture valuable untold community stories. Local content history and needs of local communities in Malaysia is still not being sufficiently captured and preserved. Using the Mediated Recordkeeping Culture-as-Evidence Model as a theoretical framework, the study examines the current practice and identifies areas for improvement in oral history collections development and management in Malaysia. The evidence of this study is that oral history projects undertaken in Malaysia do not conform to a fully participatory approach, with researchers tending to regard interviewees as information providers who have little involvement in developing interview questions, program aims and outcomes. The findings in the study are crucial in providing practical suggestions for the cultural institutions that are currently involved in, or plan to take part in, oral history's collection and storage to form an ideal oral history programme for local communities in Malaysia.
Keywords: Oral history, continuum theory, mediated recordkeeping: culture-as-evidence model, information management, library management.

1   Introduction

A British colony between 1873 and 1930, on independence in 1957, the Federation of Malaya was established as a parliamentary democracy consisting of a federal government and thirteen state governments (Official Portal Ministry of Communications and Multimedia Malaysia, 2019). In 2019, the population was 32.4 million, with Malays and other indigenous groups, including the people of Sabah and Sarawak,

accounting for 68.8%, Chinese 23.2%, and Indian 7% (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2019). The state religion is Islam, however other religions can be practised. Ethnologue lists 134 languages for Malaysia. Chinese languages include Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hakka and Foochow. The Indian community includes speakers of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi (Albury, 2017). The Malay language also has numerous regional dialects. Bahasa Malaysia, the official language, is seen as an important means of unifying the nation (Smith and Smith, 2017).

The local historical material currently available in Malaysia is inadequate for research needs (Shamsul Arrieya Ariffin et al. 2012). During Japanese occupation (1941-1945), official documents relating to the administration of the Malay States and British influence in Malaya were widely destroyed (Samsiah Muhamad, 1996), leaving considerable gaps in the historical record (Zahidi, 2013; Mahani, 2018). There is also a significant lack of material related to Malaysian communities, such as local traditions and histories, ethnic communities, and themes such as the history of colonisation, and traditional medicine. This is in part due to the fact that Malaysian society was largely an oral society, with a strong oral tradition encompassing its epics, poetry, proverbs, legends, romances and myths (Mukti & Hwa, 2004).

Oral history becomes important in this context for a number of reasons. It can supplement or correct existing, largely print-based sources in history, and it is well-suited for capturing the voices of marginalised communities (McDonnell, 2003). It is an appropriate and useful means of engaging communities in documenting, describing, and creating access to community collections held by cultural institutions (Thurgood 2002) towards developing a participatory mode of history making as highlighted by Lee and Springer, 2020). Bastian and Alexander (2009) argue that it is essential the voice of the community be heard if cultural institutions are to fulfil their role in recording and preserving community identity and history.

However, despite early initiatives that include that of Sarawak Museum in 1957 (Radia Banu Jan Mohamad et. al, 2012), and the National Archives, which since 1965 has sought to document information related to prominent figures (Samsiah Muhamad, 1996), the practice of oral history has not advanced as was hoped, nor kept pace with developments in neighbouring countries such as Singapore (Mahani Musa, 2018). Oral history in Malaysia remains too focused on official history, paying insufficient attention to community history and perspectives (Musa, 2018). The availability of comprehensive local historical collections emphasising community and national identity is still inadequate as they are not being sufficiently and consistently captured. To date, little has been done to investigate the role of cultural institutions and how they could be more responsive to the needs of communities, from the initial process of creation, through to access to, and pluralisation of, oral history collections. Using the Mediated Recordkeeping Culture-as-Evidence Model as a theoretical framework, this paper reports the findings of a project designed to explore current practice, to identify the key issues at play, and to identify areas for improvement in the development of oral history collections in Malaysia.

2   Literature Review

Oral history, applied as part of the effort to preserve memory at different points in time, is not static but encompasses movement and captures historical information, such as culture, traditions, arts and other ideas across space and time in a networked techno-logical environment (Olick & Robbins, 1998) and now be more accessible to wider population (Janesick, 2020; Swaminathan and Mulvihill, 2022).

Thompson (2007) argues that there have been four major stages in the development of oral history. In the United States, oral historians started to promote oral histories in the mid-1950s, encouraging cultural institutions to recover gaps in history (Ritchie, 2011). Memory, as a crucial source of historical evidence, was recognised back in the 1970s, reinforcing existing practice in the collection of eyewitness accounts to supple-ment archival and other documentary materials. A paradigm shift arose in response to those who questioned the accuracy of memories, and the potential bias of interviewees. This not only resulted in the development of more rigorous practice guidelines and methods of validating events but the realization that oral history differed from other historical techniques in its ability to promote alternative historical perspectives and to reflect a greater range of experience and meaning (Portelli, 2006). During the 1980s, the ability of oral history to contribute to the empowerment of communities, including those of refugees and indigenous people gained importance and significantly impacted practice, while in the final stage, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, digital tools and technologies have been used to transform the interpretation, presentation, access and use of oral history (Holmes et. al, 2016). Internationally, such changes are exemplified by the work undertaken by cultural institutions, such as the National Library of Aus-tralia, through the Australian Generations Project, which engages communities directly and not only explores themes of twentieth-century Australian social history, but uses the latest technology at all stages, from collection, through dissemination and preser-vation (Thompson, 2016).

Although a recent survey conducted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in 2019, showing a literacy rate of over 90 per cent for Malaysian citizen under the age of 65 years, historically Malaysian society was very much an oral society (Abu, 2014). The absence of written scripts forced local communities to transmit invaluable knowledge through oral means, and this included epic stories, poetry, proverbs, legends, romances, myths, and other oral traditions and history.

As noted in the introduction, during the Japanese occupation of Malaysia (1941-1945), official documents were frequently destroyed, to undermine the records related to the affairs of the Malay States and the records relating to British influence in Malaya (Muhamad, 1996). The resultant gaps in historical records, combined with the oral na-ture of much knowledge, resulted in an early interest in collecting the oral history of the nation in a bid to supplement the written record. In 1957, the Sarawak Museum became the first cultural institution in Malaysia to capture oral history and oral tradi-tions (Mohamad et. al, 2012), while the National Archives conducted its first oral his-tory project in 1965 with film actress, Tengku AzizahTengku Ariffin. Subsequently, the National Archives embarked on a program to record interviews famous figures, including politicians, teachers, soldiers and journalists (Lim and Wong, 1999). A

similar project was that of the Raja Tun Uda Library in Shah Alam, Selangor, relating to Selangor's royal family and the Selangor Chief of District (Muhammad et al., 2017). This, and subsequent practice, emphasized the importance of eyewitness accounts as evidence.

Zahidi, (2013) emphasised that cultural institutions are essential for developing an educated society and should be more responsive to the local resources needed by users or researchers. Currently, only a few institutions in Malaysia have an ongoing, full-time oral history programme with personnel who are trained and skilled at conducting oral histories. The National Archives of Malaysia is one of the key institutions that collects and conducts oral history projects every year, with initiatives to capture various aspects relating to the social, economic and political aspects of Malaysian history. However, despite the diversity of ethnicities, culture, traditions and languages among the Malaysian community, the historical information currently available is still not sufficient to fill the missing gaps in the historical records (Ding Choo Ming, 2014). Non-governmental organisations also develop initiatives to increase the local content, other than the oral history initiatives established by the National Archive and cultural institutions. As an example, on 3 August 2013, an oral history association known as the Oral History Association of Malaysia was established in Malaysia, with a membership drawn from various cultural institutions, communities, teachers, students, and researchers.

Overall, however, Musa (2018) argues that even though Malaysia took the first step to develop an oral history program in 1963, the effort has been somewhat weak and has made less progress, compared to neighbouring countries such as Singapore. Oral history techniques have received little consideration and are not adequately used or applied by historians, researchers and students and cultural institution professionals.

As noted, since the late 1990s digital tools and technologies have been used to transform the practice of and access to oral history (Holmes et. al, 2016). Such tools facilitate the management, sharing, interpretation of and access to oral history interviews and collections (Boyd, 2014). In Malaysia, oral history is distributed through history narration sessions, exhibitions, and collections of photographs, transcripts and videos (Muhammad et al 2017, Musa, Maslan and Abdul Rahim 2018). The role of cultural institutions is particularly important in adopting and promoting the benefits of new technologies, but the little research that has been undertaken suggests that there remains much to be done (Muhammad et al, 2017; Musa, Maslan and Abdul Rahim (2018).

Gilliland and McKemmish (2014) highlight the importance of a participatory approach in archival institutions, arguing that:

Participatory archives acknowledge that multiple parties have rights, responsibilities, needs and perspectives with regard to the record. They are created by, for and with multiple communities, according to and respectful of community values, practices, beliefs and needs (p. 80)

Oral history projects related to communities has mostly been conducted by university-based researchers in an attempt to document the views of ordinary people (Bidin et al., 2013 and Musa, Maslan and Rahim, 2018), to highlight the differences in views and perspectives of national history (Yen, 2013; Zamri, Sulam and Merican, 2017).

Yen (2013), for example, emphasised the collection of eyewitness accounts of historical incidents, arguing that documenting diverse perspectives allowed the contesting of dominant discourses and official accounts of history.

There are two main approaches to studying archival material: the life-cycle model and the records continuum model. Gilliland (2017), noting that archival science in Europe, former European colonies and the United States has typically been framed within a life cycle view, states that in life cycle-based approaches:

…records move through predictable stages in their lives (creation and capture within an organisational recordkeeping system; storage and maintenance, semi-active, inactive; disposition-transfer to an archives or discarding and destruction), with each stage associated with particular activities, agents (records creators, records managers, archivists) and levels and types of use (initially high, then progressively lower as records become inactive, until they are either disposed of or are preserved in an archive where they are subject to use by secondary users) (Gilliland 2017, p. 40).

Life cycle models are often limited to the management of paper records (Yusof and Chell, 2000) and although widely accepted in the field, are limited in their understanding of the changing nature of records over time and how they may be viewed and interpreted from different perspectives.

Records continuum theory is influenced by Anthony Giddens' structuration theory (Upward, 2000), which '*attempts to understand human social behaviour by studying the processes involved between the actor and the structure*' Giddens (1984). Using this approach, records are understood to have multiple lives across space and time as the contexts that surround their use and control change, re-shaping and renewing the cycles of creation and disposition. This has resulted in the development of a number of models, the most influential of which has been the Records Continuum Model (RCM). Rodrigues (2016) drew on this model in his study of archival collection pratices relating to the South African Portuguese community, and it has been particularly useful in studies exploring the processes involved in capturing and linking the contents of documents (McKemmish, Upward and Reed, 2010).

The Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-Evidence Model (Figure 1), was developed from the RCM when exploring the creation of records within YouTube communities (Gibbons, 2014). Used as a theoretical framework in this study, it offers a framework for '*memory institutions to connect, collaborate and facilitate an active, participative shared memory-making network that is diverse, yet inclusive of multiple and potentially contested narratives*' (Gibbons, 2016). In the RCM, recordkeeping is defined as "a form of witnessing and memory-making, a particular way of evidencing and memorializing individual and collective lives" (McKemmish, Upward and Reed, 2010, p 4447). In Gibbons new model, mediated recordkeeping refers to:

…multiple narratives and memories, including counter narratives and contested memories facilitated by technologies, frameworks, environments, subjective meaning, and the activities of people from diverse and multiple contexts. (Gibbons, 2014, p. 248)

The value of using the Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-Evidence Model in the study of oral history is that it considers the practice of oral history as an integrated whole, from conception through to pluralisation, showing how decisions at every level are interconnected and can impact on outcomes.
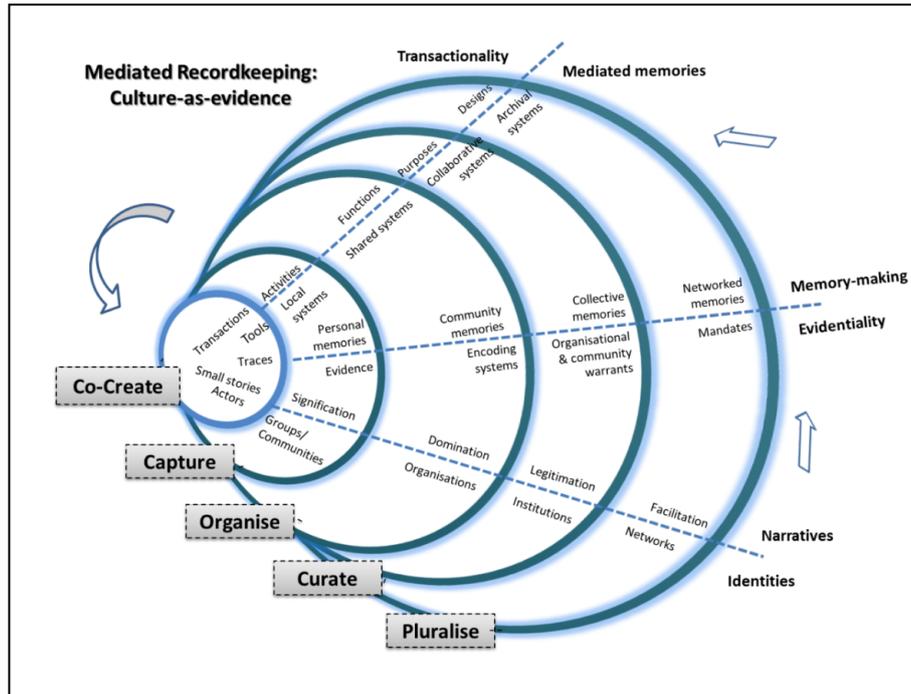

Figure 1: Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-evidence model (Gibbons, 2014)

The Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-Evidence Model (see Figure 1) is expressed in terms of axes, dimensions, and levels. The axes, which include Memory-making, Evidentiality, Identities, Narratives, Mediated Memories and Transactionality, have been used to develop the main themes of this study, while the dimensions and levels have been applied to describe the oral history practices of research participants.

In an oral history project, the information collected by using oral history techniques is insufficient without any contextual information. The relationship between oral historical information and other related historical sources and artefacts needs to be captured and preserved in metadata.

Of the six axes, Memory-making, Evidentiality, Narratives, and Mediated Memories are of central importance to this study and are closely intertwined. As Gibbons (2014) states that Memory-making involves:

i.   Activities involved in creating, capturing, storing, destroying, sharing, communicating, preserving and managing information as a tool for memory. (p. 9)

ii. Interaction, interpretation and communication embedded in practices, norms and values that contribute to the continuous dynamism, iteration and progression of cultural heritage. (p. 239)

iii. The cultural practice of recordkeeping, mediated through narrative, identity and the practices and values of individuals and groups. (p.262)

Community memories are constructed when a group of individuals share a common history or interest and the people who live in the memories reflect upon it. Bastian, (2003, p. 5) stated that '*Records, oral or written, become both the creators as well as the products of the societal memory of a community*' (p. 5). Collective memories relate to learned social practices and shared values. According to Gibbons (2014), Networked memories are defined as, '*The spaces enabled by technology which enable people to share and communicate a cultural identity',* such as social media (Gibbons, (2014) p. 240).

Abrams (2010) defines narrative as, '*The means by which we communicate experience, knowledge and emotion. A narrative is also a story told according to certain cultural conventions'.* However, Narrative can also be related to issues of power, as Gibbons (2014) argues *'Narrative becomes an instrument for dominant ideologies and power, a way to share and preserve memories and knowledge, as well as a mechanism for individuals, communities and societies to understand time as past, present and future'* (p. 243).

Dijck (2007) defines mediated memories as, '*Activities and objects we produce and appropriate by means of media technologies, for creating and re-creating a sense of the past, present, and future of ourselves in relation to others'* (p.21). This is related to the Memory-making and Narrative axes but builds on those by emphasising the role of technology in managing, accessing and pluralising the content of collections. In this context, local, shared and collaborative systems become central to access and pluralisation, as does the metadata that underpins them. This latter aspect also contributes to the role of oral history as Evidence and how its interpretation in terms of Memory-making and Narrative.

Of the five dimensions, the Co-create dimension is perhaps the most relevant as it is based on the idea that "*creation is not an isolated event, but is an act of collaboration at multiple levels*" (Gibbons, 2014, p. 230), involving roles and processes that interrelate with all other dimensions. In this view, both interviewers and interviewees are co-creators in the oral history creation process.

3 Methodology

This paper reports on a qualitative research project which explored the research questions:
RQ1: What are the current practices of oral history in Malaysia?

RQ2: How can cultural institutions reframe or transform themselves to facilitate local communities' oral history collections?

RQ2SQ1: What are the relevant oral history services, programmes and activities that oral history practitioners expect from the Malaysian cultural institutions?
RQ2SQ2: How can cultural institutions contribute to the development of their local community's oral history collections?

RQ3: How the Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-evidence model be used to assist initiatives undertaken by cultural institutions and the oral history practitioners?

In particular, the paper focuses on findings which relate directly to community use, creation and the role of oral history in memory-making and the construction of narrative. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, with participants drawn from all regions of Malaysia. Interviewees were given the opportunity to clarify questions, and close attention was paid to language and non-verbal expression, to avoid confusion, especially when dealing with participants from diverse cultures, as suggested by Birks, Chapman & Francis (2007).

Purposive sampling was applied to identify cultural institution professionals; however snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants. Interviews of between 60 to 80 minutes were conducted between December 2016 and August 2017. In total 38 people were interviewed, including seven expert informants. Eleven cultural institution professionals were interviewed, of whom two were employed by municipal council libraries and museums, two were from the National Archives, six from state libraries, and one from a special library. 20 independent oral history practitioners were interviewed, of whom four were expert practitioners with extensive experience in collecting oral history, six village people from different ethnic groups, and ten independent researchers. In the following discussion, codes are used to identify interviewees: expert practitioners, EP1 to EP5; members of village communities, VP1 to VP6; and independent researchers, IR1 to IR9.

Approximately half of the oral history practitioners interviewed for this study were members of the Malaysian Oral History Association, which aims to cooperate with various agencies in recording oral history, organising training, and promoting an awareness of the significance of oral history to the broader community (Zahidi, 2013). Established in 2013, its membership is drawn cultural institutions, communities, teachers, students, and researchers. The analysis of interviews was based on the coding paradigm of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Open and axial coding were used to facilitate analysis. Open coding was used in the preliminary stage, with the coding based on themes derived from the theoretical framework, the initial research design, concepts from the

literature and concepts emerging through immersion in the data. Using Atlas.ti version 8 Software, important keywords, critical terms, and the initial codes were developed. During axial coding, additional codes emerged. The codes were then arranged according to hierarchy and grouped to establish more meaningful codes, with connections among themes and key concepts identified, compared and, where necessary, combined to produce a final set of themes. The axes of the Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-Evidence Model - memory-making, evidentiality, identities, narratives, mediated memories and transactionality were then used to further develop the themes.

4 Findings

4.1 Current Practice

Data was collected from nine cultural institutions actively involved in collecting oral history: the National Archives, Selangor State Library, Perdana Library, Petaling Jaya Museum, Subang Jaya Municipal Council (MPSJ) Hypermedia Library, Kedah State Library, Terengganu State Library, Melaka Public Library and Sarawak State Library. Most oral history collected by these institutions focuses on government priorities, in keeping with their mandate to collect historical information with high national value.

State libraries and museums engage in projects involving ethnic groups. For example, local traditions and culture feature strongly in the collections of the Kedah State Library and the Melaka Public Library, while ancestral traditions, indigenous land use, cultures, and traditional practices associated with the Bidayuh, Iban and Melanau community histories have been recorded by the Council for Customs and Traditions in Sarawak. Despite these examples, community-based projects are limited in number and framed around government interests.

Independent oral history practitioners reported a number of community-related projects, some of which were funded by government ministries. For example, VP4 is involved in a project which aims to record and preserve the Kristang language, and IR3 reported working on a project to preserve the history of traditional performances such as hadrah, which originated in the Middle East, and consists of singing in Malay, Urdu or Arabic, accompanied by dancing and drumming.

Most independent practitioners work on small ad hoc projects, motivated by a desire to help connect individuals and local communities with their identity. Village people typically participate in oral history programs as part of a team, acting as intermediaries to provide background information to the interviewers. Their involvement is motivated by a desire to preserve memories and identity, including culture, language, music and skills. Some have received formal training, however others rely on experience gained working on projects. VP2, VP3, VP4 and VP6 reported that constraints relating to funding, skills and time create difficulties in producing outcomes from oral history interviews.

Funding for oral history initiatives is affected by a lack of awareness of its importance. Although State government support is generally seen as crucial for oral history programmes, IP4 commented that some state government officers see no need for

their involvement, assuming that everything can be published through social media platforms such as YouTube.

4.2 Evidentiality

Those collecting oral history stressed its role as evidence, which is a critical aspect in assessing the value of records. In the context of oral history, input from witnesses to events is vital in providing evidence and context, but there remains an overarching concern relating to the validity of oral history and its interpretation and the need to capture supporting evidence.

While cultural institution professionals see the value of oral history mostly in terms of verifying the data in written records and providing additional reference sources, practitioners believe that oral history can provide a counterpoint to other historical sources and help to maintain the historical consciousness or collective memories of communities. VP2 thought that, through oral history projects, competing narratives could be produced and so promote understanding. According to IR1:

I give one example in the Malaysian community itself. We have one opinion that states Chin Peng was a destructive communist. A bad thing. However, other historians present a different view of Chin Peng. This is the other side of history. The other side of history is the key contribution of the memory itself. Other than existing sources. If we depend too much on British sources in writing Malaysian History, we will become British-centric. Thus, our writing will be pro-British. Therefore, memory will provide historical balance. Indirectly, it means it will assist researchers to become more objective.

The credibility of interviewees is obviously important to claims of evidentiality. Criteria for selecting interviewees proposed by cultural institution professionals and independent practitioners alike include identifying those with a broad knowledge of the chosen topic, balanced or less biased views, sharp memories, and are respected by community members as having relevant knowledge.

The means used to identify participants varies, and included contacting relevant authors, using social media, identifying veterans or making contact through the village head. IP4 discussed the importance of using an intermediary familiar with the community, its culture and languages. Although the majority of those interviewed stated that choosing suitable people as intermediaries or brokers is essential, they cautioned that the appointment of an intermediary does not guarantee that opinions from the broader communities are included. They stressed that cross-checking with additional sources increases credibility, contributing to the integrity of the knowledge captured.

Newspapers and photos are often used as supplementary sources. For example, VP2 maintains a collection of pictures and artefacts documenting Chetty community life, including marriages and traditional foods. Other materials such as manuscripts and diaries are valued, but often prove difficult to locate.

It is seen as desirable to collect oral history immediately after an event to record interviewee feelings at the time, however the ability to do this is impacted by budget

constraints. This attitude reflects the role of oral history as evidence in describing an event, rather than exploring the meaning of the event, for which opinions might change over time as people have time to reflect.

The ways in which material is collected, including ethics protocols and working with community concerns, is seen as important to validating organizational and community warrants, and so the integrity of the stories collected as evidence. Community representation, ownership and control of oral history are also important in this context and will be discussed further under Memory-making.

4.3 Narratives and memory-making

The ways in which oral history can be understood as evidence also affects its interpretation and the ways in which narratives can be constructed. IP8 believes that oral history collections supplement the written record and provide useful sources, preserving local history for future generations. IP2 argued that oral history is a useful technique for preserving identity and working culture, while for IP9 it can correct the historical record relating to minorities. IP4 argued that an understanding of history and an appreciation of racial and cultural differences can be strengthened, adding that oral history sources can contest the colonial dominant account.

Cultural institutions professionals were generally of the view that the official national discourse remains dominant, reflecting the role of federal and state authorities in shaping collective memory. Narratives often become dominant because of widespread dissemination through the media, for example television and radio. Most argued that these dominant narratives detract attention from alternate versions, although some, such as IP5, believe that as families pass down personal stories or stories relating to national history, their stories will become dominant over generations.

Interpreting the ways in which memory-making occurs in the light of the Mediated Recordkeeping model, the interest here would be to understand if and how such local stories become pluralised as community memory, and it is in this step that a number of issues arise. Community memory was often mentioned in connection with the question of ownership and control of oral history collections. Cultural institutions adopt a variety of strategies to connect and collaborate with communities, seeking out people, particularly those who speak and understand diverse dialects and ethnic languages, to participate in oral history programs. They also recognise that it is important to identify key speakers capable of representing the community. Despite such attempts at collaboration, communities often feel frustrated when they lose connection to the research they have been involved in.

As IP2 and IP7 noted, the ability to create oral history collections with community associations depends on community willingness to share. Villagers sometimes refuse to participate or contribute their private collections because they are afraid that others will not take good care of their collections which have been kept across generations. Cultural institution professionals also reported that some interviewees are unwilling to share certain information as they fear that it might be manipulated or misused, an attitude reflected in the desire of some communities for more control over outputs. Another concern in handing control to institutions, raised by EP3, is that collections potentially

became too official and challenging to access. This was echoed by VP4, who argued that such collections belong to the community, and that community control makes them more accessible to the local community.

Because of such concerns, village people who participated in this study argued for their own space. For example, a member of the Portuguese community argued that developing a community museum is not only the best way to organise community memories, but that it would encourage further contributions. This view was supported by IR1, who considered community ownership important, but saw a role for cultural institutions providing support in terms of planning, budgeting and training. In principle, cultural institution professionals were sympathetic to community ownership and control but thought that local communities required guidance and support if they were to take on that role.

The capacity of communities in terms of long-term management and preservation was also raised, as was the important role that government institutions and related agencies should play in this regard. The tension here is between those, such as IR7, who believe that cultural institution professionals are more qualified to manage community history as they had formal training, and those, such as EP1 and IR7 who argued that collections could be jointly managed and owned, which each group contributing according to its capabilities.

Further concerns were raised in relation to ownership, privacy and copyright. VP1 was keen to deposit oral history he had gathered but had serious concerns about legal and privacy aspects and feared some sensitive content would not be protected. Most cultural institution professionals agreed that the judgement as to what remains private or public must be decided by the interviewee, with sensitive information being reviewed by interviewees and oral history committees set up by cultural institutions. In practice, cultural institutions have the exclusive right to determine if and how material in the collections can be used and, for the most part, users are only allowed to access the content of audio recordings and transcripts within the specific institution. Copyright, privacy and access rights all need further consideration to instil confidence in the management of oral history collections.

4.4 Oral history collections: management and access

These concerns naturally lead to broader questions of how collections are to be managed and accessed. As can be seen from the Mediated Recordkeeping model, decisions made in this area can have far-reaching consequences in terms of pluralisation and memory-making, and failings in these areas can in turn shape community attitudes.

For the most part, the oral history collections in cultural institutions have not been digitised, although they are aware that this compromises long-term preservation. IP2, IP8 and IP9 commented that the cultural institutions they represented have plans in place to migrate deteriorating cassette and tapes to an integrated digital platform. This was considered a more significant problem for community-based collections than institutions. One solution would be to develop standards or guidelines and to provide oral history practitioners with training.

Oral history practitioners reported difficulties in accessing their own recordings due to a lack of suitable metadata, and that guidelines on capturing metadata would be also be useful. Their suggestions for improved access included the further development of finding aids, catalogues, indexes and registers used to facilitate, manage and mediate access to records and archival collections. These concerns flow through to shared and collaborative systems as well.

Independent researchers who participated in this study considered that cultural institutions need to improve the process of retrieval and dissemination of oral history collections, by providing access via comprehensive and user-friendly databases, with guidance on evidential sources. Most cultural institution professionals believe that the future lies in the development of dynamic and distributed archival systems which integrate audio, video and transcripts, however budget constraints mean that little progress has been made. The National Archives has developed a portal for accessing digitised pictures and documents, however it does not provide access to oral history collections. At present, only one cultural institution reported having uploaded video and transcripts to their web for public access. The remainder only allow access to oral history collections at their physical building. It is clear that much work remains to be done in this area, but funding is a significant issue.

5 Findings

The themes identified above largely match the axes of the Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-Evidence Model, particularly in relation to Identities, Evidentiality, Narratives and Memory-making. What is important to understand is how these themes interrelate, and this is where examining practice through the application of the model becomes useful.

The findings describe an environment where, despite scattered examples of community-based projects, the focus of the main collecting institutions is on the official view of history, with funding being directed primarily to those projects deemed important to that view. In that context, the role of oral history as evidence is clearly seen as important, however the evidentiary value of oral history is considered from quite a narrow perspective, one that emphasises supporting documentary sources. The value of oral history in providing alternative views of events and access to a range of voices is a low priority, as is any in-depth exploration of the ways in which oral history can contribute to an understanding of the past.

In the model, the Evidentiary axis is closely linked to the Narratives axis, and in turn to that of Memory-making. Narrow collecting priorities, combined with a narrow definition of what constitutes evidence, impacts the types of stories that are collected, and so the types of narratives that can be constructed and the meanings assigned to them. As a result, the practice of oral history can come to reinforce the dominant view of history, legitimating it through the neglect of other voices, and raising its contribution to collective memory. If this situation is to change, cultural institutions need to pay more attention to aspects such as the purposes of documenting oral history, the culture

of those involved, the selection of the appropriate people to speak on behalf of specific communities, and a sensitivity to community needs and processes.

Cutting across all of these issues is the concept of Co-creation, which is at the core of the Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-evidence model. In applying the model to the field of oral history, it must be recognised that both interviewer and interviewees play an active role in recording oral history and so developing collections. The exact level of co-creation depends on the scope of individual projects and funding levels. The evidence of this study is that oral history projects undertaken in Malaysia do not conform to a fully participatory approach, with researchers tending to regard interviewees as information providers who have little involvement in developing interview questions, program aims and outcomes. While additional funding for more community-based projects would go some way to addressing this issue, that is not the only issue. As discussed previously, there are issues of trust that can undermine relations between cultural institutions and communities, often due to researchers collecting oral history and then not 'giving back' to the relevant communities, that need to be addressed. Improved local access to collections and more focus on community co-ownership of the outputs would go some way to improving the situation.

The final axis of the model, Mediated memories, deals with issues relating to the development of metadata, systems and standardised ways of dealing with languages and transcripts. Although some cultural institutions have developed shared systems such as websites and podcasts to manage and make oral history collections available, most have not yet reached that stage. Standards and guidelines need to be developed to facilitate activities such as indexing and retrieval, and metadata standards need to be developed to support information on context, rights and provenance. Guidelines for producing transcripts should also be developed to encourage a systematic approach to storing documentation and metadata, especially with regard to resources in languages and dialects other than standard Malaysian. Such actions would facilitate the sharing of content and systems development.

6   Conclusions

The Mediated Recordkeeping: Culture-as-evidence model has proved useful in drawing out themes related to co-creation, participation, the provision of meaning and alternative perspectives, both the provision of and questioning of evidence and dominant narratives, and how technology mediates access and interpretation.

Cultural institutions in Malaysia could benefit from, and transform, current oral history practice by working with communities and other stakeholders to encourage community involvement in all aspects of co-creating, capturing, curating and pluralising their history to improve the meaning and accessibility of the collections. Having said that, participation on the part of the communities remains limited, due not only to limited funding opportunities, but also due to concerns that community stories, traditions, and viewpoints are not valued, and will potentially be mismanaged. These themes resonate strongly with current issues surrounding community archives internationally. Consequently, there is a need to re-evaluate the role of cultural institutions with a focus

on engaging with and equipping communities with the necessary skills and guidelines to conduct oral history in a manner that recognises and meets community needs.

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