

ORAL HISTORY AND AFRICAN STUDIES:

For an ethical agenda in the postcolonial age



Photo source: Eric Miller, Launch of the Federation of Trade Unions COSATU (Cape Town 1986)
https://slought.org/resources/caught_up_in_history

**16 June 2025
9:30 – 18:00**

LOCATION

Room 0.016 (ground floor)

**Bâtiment de recherche sud,
Campus Condorcet, Aubervilliers
(Metro : Front Populaire, line 12)**

**Workshop organized as part of the
project WOMEN AT WORK.**
For a Comparative History of Women's
Professions in Africa
<https://womatwork.hypotheses.org/16-06-2025-oral-history-and-african-studies-for-an-ethical-agenda-in-the-postcolonial-age>



IMAF
Institut des mondes africains
UMR 8171 (CNRS) - UMR 243 (IRD)



WOMEN AT WORK



Funded by
the European Union



European Research Council
Established by the European Commission

Programme

Monday, 16th June 2025 –

**Room 0.016 Bâtiment de recherche Sud, Campus Condorcet
Aubervilliers, Metro Front Populaire, line 12 – France**

Zoom link: <https://cnrs.zoom.us/j/99677908604?pwd=UXOkRcBtHcCgdEbINC2Ua7IPVqvaWb.1>

9:30 – 9:45 Welcome and opening

Introduction

9:45 – 10:30 **Elena Vezzadini**, IMAF– **Karin Pallaver**, University of Bologna
The Dilemma of Doing Research on the Global South in a Context of Growing Global Inequalities

Morning session: The ethics of representations

Discussant: Sara Panata, CNRS LAM

10:30 – 11:30 **Noor Nieftagodien**, University of Witwatersrand
Oral History and its Radical Promises: a Perspective from South Africa

11:30 – 11:45 *Break*

11:45 – 12:45 **Franziska Rüedi**, University of Zurich
Violence, Generational Trauma, and the Ethics of Representation: Oral and Visual Narratives from South Africa

12:45 – 14:15 *Lunch break (IMAF, Bâtiment de recherches sud, 3rd floor, IMAF kitchen)*

Afternoon session: Responsibilities

Discussant: Sara Panata, CNRS LAM

14:15 – 15:15 **Olutayo Charles Adesina**, University of Manchester/University of Ibadan
The Fall and Rise of Orality in the Post-Colonial Age: A Critique of What We know and What We don't Know

15:15 – 15:30 *Break*

15:30 – 16:30 **Thomas Cauvin** and **Natalia Gonçalves**, University of Luxembourg
Rethinking Oral Historical Practices Through Public History

16:30 – 17:30 **Chao Tayana**, Independent scholar
Oral Histories as Responsibility: Navigating Trust, Ownership, and Access in Memory Work

17:30 – 18:00 Concluding remarks

Abstracts (in alphabetical order)

Olutayo Charles Adesina, University of Manchester/University of Ibadan,

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The Fall and Rise of Orality in the Post-Colonial Age: A Critique of What We know and What We don't Know

For decades, many historians of the world and other researchers have been sceptical about the use of oral sources as tools for historical reconstruction. But in the global age, the deployment of a multiplicity of data and resources has once again raised the argument in support of the use of oral sources as a world-resource historical data. The use of orality in Africa has remained a gold standard in history analysis and reconstruction. It is a truism that the use of orality can contribute to complexities in historical reconstruction. It has its identifiable weaknesses. These can be due to socially constructed human issues and (mis) understandings ranging from language diversities to issues of translation, myth and legend, gender, family, community, politics, religion, conflicts and geographic factors. The multidimensionality of agendas, social boundaries, ethnicities, religious and political ideologies and philosophies have made the use of oral sources extremely technical and even problematic. There are stereotypical narratives, memory loss, deliberate distortions, misinterpretations, cross-cultural biases, and instincts based on the need for self-preservation. The questions to be addressed by this work are: How do we conduct excellent research using oral sources? How do we decipher interests undergirding responses by our respondents? How do you combat the dangers of single stories? How do you resolve the problems of provenance? As a result of the foregoing, this work will address the strategies necessary for identifying respondents and the tools for collecting, processing, analysing, and documenting oral information with precision and thoroughness. This is critical for meeting the necessary quality and dimensions for conducting oral interviews. These and other issues will be sorted out during this presentation.

Thomas Cauvin and **Natalia Gonçalves**, University of Luxembourg,

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Rethinking Oral Historical Practices Through Public History

In this presentation, Thomas Cauvin and Natalia Gonçalves (University of Luxembourg) explore public history, its focus on shared authority and the decentralization of expertise to assess its potential to decolonize oral history practice. Although we are not expert in and do not work on the history of Africa, we have conceived and developed participatory projects – partly relying on oral history – to support and facilitate ethical and responsible practice of history production. We will present our participatory projects with migrant communities in Luxembourg, our recent Digital Fellowship for the Global South as well as our collaboration with public history institutions outside Europe. In addition to those projects, we will also reflect upon our recent courses on *Contested Histories and Harmful Practices* in which we invite students to reflect upon how historical research – in particular oral history – can sometimes be harmful for participants. We will offer some practical examples to discuss how to challenge the (re)colonial structure of scholarship and academic structures.

Noor Nieftagodien, University of Witwatersrand, noor.nieftagodien@wits.ac.za

Oral History and its Radical Promises: a Perspective from South Africa

This presentation/paper offers initial reflections on the history of oral history in the production of counter-hegemonic historiographies in South Africa from the 1970s to the present. Its starting premise is that Oral History has been pivotal in the creation of new histories, especially in the development of African histories. Oral history's initial growth as a primary research method emerged from a critique of colonial archives and the proliferation of historical research in postcolonial societies. South African scholars' turn to African history and oral history occurred later, mainly from the mid-1970s, and was also influenced by the popularity of social and labour history, and the early development of people's histories. Oral history was therefore constitutive of a movement to produce counter-hegemonic histories, that is, of ordinary people as opposed to Eurocentric and androcentric historical narratives. Its practitioners hoped/promised that it would contribute to the democratisation of historical research, amplify or give voice to those whose histories had been silenced or erased, and create opportunities for both co-production (between scholars and publics) and autonomous production (by non-academic publics) of new histories. The presentation/paper interrogates these aspirations across three periods in the evolution of South African historiography: the

birth and rapid growth of revisionist (radical) history from the 1970s, which increasingly turned to oral history; a period from the early 1990s of mounting critiques of oral history, influenced by the turn to post-modernism as well as the surge in memory studies, which posed critical questions about the method; finally, a resurgence in oral history from the 2000s driven by, among others, renewed interest in local social history, heritage and public history and indigenous knowledge. The presentation/paper will conclude with a focus on one or two contemporary public history projects in which oral history has been pivotal in order to consider how the preceding debates about the method have shaped approaches to ethics, the politics of co-production and the creation of new histories.

Franziska Rüedi, University of Zurich, franziska.rueedi@hist.uzh.ch

Violence, Generational Trauma, and the Ethics of Representation: Oral and Visual Narratives from South Africa

This paper explores how violence and trauma shape memory and structure oral history interviews. I ask what role the positionality and subjectivity of a white, female European researcher play in these contexts, and what ethical considerations might need to be considered. Drawing on Luisa Passerini's approach, I analyze oral history interviews alongside visual memories to examine the possibilities, limitations, and ethical challenges of using oral history to document violence during South Africa's transition to democracy. To do so, the paper focuses on two key sources: a set of oral history interviews and a photography project *Inganekwane* (meaning 'storytelling'). *Inganekwane* captures contemporary perspectives on Khumalo Street—an infamous site of intense violence in the early 1990s. Exhibited in 2021, *Inganekwane* brought together young photographers, most of whom had not experienced the violence firsthand but had come to understand it through stories and historical narratives. What do these photographs reveal about the violence that once consumed the region? What can we learn about generational trauma? And how can we interpret it in relation to the oral histories of those who lived through it? By analyzing the interplay between memory, speech (or silence), and imagery, this paper explores how both visual and oral narratives shape historical understanding and relate to one another. It also reflects on the ethical complexities of representing trauma through both oral and visual storytelling.

Chao Tayana, Independent scholar, chao@afRICandigitalheritage.org

Oral Histories as Responsibility: Navigating Trust, Ownership, and Access in Memory Work

Oral history has long been celebrated as a method of amplifying marginalized voices, yet it remains entangled in extractive research practices that often serve academic institutions more than the communities from which these histories emerge. In my work on Mau Mau memory in Kenya, I have encountered persistent concerns from interviewees about the fate of their stories: *Who controls them? Who benefits? Where do they go?* These questions reveal a deeper crisis of trust shaped by colonial legacies and ongoing North-South power imbalances in knowledge production. This presentation critically examines the ethical responsibilities of oral historians, particularly in contexts where histories of violence intersect with histories of erasure. I reflect on the risks of “over-interviewing” certain communities, the challenge of ensuring accessibility beyond academia, and the possibilities of co-creating digital oral history repositories that are accountable to the people they document. By foregrounding the voices of those who ask why we collect their histories, this talk invites a conversation about how oral history can be an act of care, restitution, and community empowerment rather than a tool of scholarly extraction.