



Challenges of Conflicting Memories in Oral History Narratives: A Conversation with Troy Phili on Building Charlotte Maxeke's Biography

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ABSTRACT

This paper is presented in the form of an interview, encompassing the key voice of Troy Phili, the former Unit Manager for Burial Grounds and Graves, at South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) between 2005-2013. The paper aims to highlight the distortions in the profiling of Charlotte Maxeke and how this could lead to misrepresentations of her unique role in the struggle. From an oral history perspective, an interview with Troy Phili contributes to the correction of such distortions. Thus, the paper is embedded in this oral testimony. The interview emphasized oral history as a means of correcting historical distortions, as was the case of Troy while working towards the declaration of Maxeke's gravesite as a national heritage site. This paper also relied on desktop analysis of both primary and secondary sources of data. The authors perceive these tendencies not as seeking to downplay Maxeke's catalytic life, but how oral history as methodology and technique can be used to rectify historical misrepresentations. The paper contributes to the correction of distortions of representations of Maxeke during the declaration of her gravesite. This adds to the understanding of the historical declaration of gravesites in historicizing the role played by individuals such as Maxeke in South Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper has presented an interview between one of the authors and Troy Phili (a former Unit Manager for Burial Grounds and Graves, at South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) from 2005-2013. Reflected in this paper's body are the challenges that emerged with the conflicting memories in (oral history). Using Maxeke¹ as a case in point and building towards the narratives about the declaration of her gravesite as a national heritage site,² the paper highlights some of the few misrepresentations and misunderstandings through the use of oral testimony. With a career spanning over two decades in the field

¹ Charlotte Maxeke is the 'mother of liberation struggle' in South Africa. We should view Maxeke as a catalyst of the liberation struggle in South Africa, regardless of whether of 'gender biological' categories – women or men. Maxeke's intellectual legacy advanced the argument for gender equality after she died in 1939 and pointed to gender as a critical component and a site in the liberation struggle. Her profile challenged conventional historiographical trends which tended to fix women in a timeless past of tradition and domestication.

² See Section 27 of the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) of South Africa which provides for places of historic or cultural importance to be designated National Heritage Sites. Section 3 (2) of the National Heritage Resources Act, Act 25 of 1999, Government Notice 506, Republic of South Africa Government Gazette, Volume 406, No. 19974, Cape Town, 28 April 1999.

of heritage, Phili takes the readers into his eloquent journey which culminated with the declaration of the graves of Maxeke, Lillian Masediba Ngoyi, and Helen Joseph as the national heritage sites.³

However, this paper will merely limit its scope to Maxeke, who is the subject matter. By the phrase ‘subject’, the authors ought to be understood within the context represented as an account not from the philosophical anthropological discourse which actualizes the debate on existential and ontological positions of women in general. Within the context of this paper, oral history is hereby used in a theoretical and historical disciplinary sense. Furthermore, the paper taps into the heritage and conservation of knowledge as espoused by Maxeke’s gravesite narrative. The paper further alludes to the theoretical treatment of oral history and expands to archival resources as part of oral history given its legitimacy as primary and reliable sources. We argue in this paper that the two complement each other.

For example, there are archival resources that can be oral testimonies that can be obtained through interviews, personal accounts, and other primary sources. Amongst the primary matters raised in this paper is that these conflicting memories were shaped by the notion of historical subjectivities. On 30 April 2021, the South African Government (2021) under the Ministry of Department of Sport, Arts, and Culture headed by the Minister, Emmanuel Nkosinathi Mthethwa, commemorated the year 2021 as the “Charlotte Manny Maxeke year”, and the authors contend that it raised the subsequent questions to a broader community of scholars and the public as well. To come to an appropriate conclusion for this paper, the following questions are asked: How far has the country gone in addressing issues of gendered political memories? How do gendered political memories influence contemporary identities? What should be the role of oral history in redressing these phenomena? All these questions highlighted above, become the basis for this paper.

The point of departure will be a critical reflection and an overview of conflicts that are embodied in the literature and accounts that are founded on Maxeke’s archival resources. In doing so, firstly, the authors aimed to introduce the readers to the difficulty that laid the fundamental challenges to her biographical testimonies building towards the declaration project. Secondly, the phenomenological approach to the interview will be applied to draw the readers into the experiences of Phili during the declaration of Maxeke’s gravesite. The last segment of this paper outlines the significance of oral history as a methodology and technique to rectify historical misrepresentations, as mentioned in the interview section. The paper concludes by arguing that oral history remains the vehicle for social history *de facto* social change.



Figure 1: A young Charlotte Maxeke, (29 November 2017), South African History Online

³ The declaration of the graves of Charlotte Maxeke, Lillian Ngoyi, and Helen Joseph was in line with the National Department of Sport, Arts and Culture project of conservation of the graves that are of women who made significant contributions to cultural development, education of African independent churches, cross-cultural exchanges, trade unionism, women’s rights, and advocacy of non-racialism and participation in resistance politics.

METHODOLOGY

The paper draws heavily on an interview guided by a questionnaire and desktop analysis of both primary and secondary data sources. It further relies upon oral history with accounts of memory narrated through an interview, which serves to develop the main thesis of this paper. The direct and open-ended questions were used to get a detailed account and the key voice of Phili. This will allow the readers to understand the complex and in-depth account of other key players in Maxeke's conflicting biographies. Mahua Sarkar argues that oral history, besides giving data about occasions and occurrences, also permits the authors to comprehend the subjective experience of social change and convey it to exchange what is generally noteworthy.⁴ Given the above, the paper attempts to address what the authors refer to as the phenomenological and interpretive approaches to narrating social and liberation history. Thus, the style of this paper encompasses both the narrative and personal interview layouts.

A Brief Overview of Maxeke's Biography

To understand Maxeke's memoir, this section of the paper compels the authors to re-think deeply and reflect on ways her memoirs have been contested through published literature. For example, in her PhD thesis, Thozama April provides a reminder that there have been limited surviving accounts of Maxeke. She problematizes the fact that in most instances, Maxeke has been silenced or absent from liberation historiography.⁵ Ironically, this limit is apparent even in April's study since she only investigates and theorizes the intellectual contributions without deep historical examination that informs Maxeke's life. With such limitations, it is by no coincidence that there remain open views and subjective narratives around what the authors of this paper refer to as the distorted accounts of Maxeke's life history. This paper on a study on Maxeke as a major 'neglected' symbolic figure in the history of the liberation struggle in South Africa, opens debates about women's role in the liberation struggle. Using Maxeke as a case study, the authors challenge through liberation historiography the artificial exclusion of women into the broader African liberation scholarship.

The twentieth century marked the new waves of African-focused scholarships, such as decolonial studies, waves of feminism, the emergence of African studies, and social history or history from below within the historical discipline which some aspect focuses on (oral tradition) as an approach to conducting people's history. This is what is called 'History from Below'. This approach became crucial as it allowed scholars to offer new theoretical understandings about life stories and memories. With this, democratic aspirations of oral history as a practice to uncover what many including the authors of this paper regard as the 'hidden histories' that should empower people to make their own construction of liberation history.⁶ As it will be shown in this paper on Maxeke, tapping into individuals' strength of memories has been elusive in the mainstream writing of the country's liberation history.

The literature on Maxeke has not excluded exceptions from these debates, thus this study argues that debates have become central to the importance of oral tradition and memories. While there is literature on Maxeke backed up by oral narratives such as that of Margaret McCord, *The Calling of Katie Makhanya*, however, the complexities continue to emerge from the idea that memories are still a contested phenomenon. Moreover, it is through the memories of Katie Makhanya, Maxeke's sister, that the authors use to construct both social and political milieu unveiling and shaping the life of Maxeke. The other fascinating account to Maxeke is the work by anti-apartheid activist and journalist Zubeida Jaffer, *Beauty of the Heart: The Life and Times of Charlotte Mannya Maxeke*. Of the historical and political significance of Jaffer's work is the use of Maxeke's voice through the archives of newspapers such as *Umteteli wa Bantu* and *Abantu-Batho*. Complementing this are the works of Maxeke's fellow alumni from the USA, Alfred Batini Xuma and Sol Plaatje.⁷

⁴ Mahua Sarkar, "Between Craft and Method: Meaning and Inter-subjectivity in Oral History Analysis," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 25, no. 4 (2012): 578–600.

⁵ April Thozama, "Theorising Women: The Intellectual Contributions of Charlotte Maxeke to the Struggle for Liberation in South Africa" (University of the Western Cape, 2012).

⁶ Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch, and Paula Hamilton, "The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives," *Oral History* 22, no. 2 (1994): 33–43.

⁷ Historical Papers, William Cullen Library, Wits, A. B. Xuma Papers, entitled 'What an educated African girl can do'.

Maxeke belonged to the class of the elites in South Africa's liberation historiography. Not overshadowed by her contemporaries, she was a towering figure in her own right as she earned the name, a "mother of liberation struggle" in South Africa. Another piece of literature that equally highlights Maxeke's life is the work by Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman* which accounts for some memorable years as Maxeke had attended with Kuzwayo, the All-African Convention (AAC) Conference in 1936. According to Kuzwayo, these were the most persuasive accounts of oral testimonies about Maxeke. Despite the above, many questions still need to be addressed regarding these oral testimonies in her biographies. For instance, contestation about whether Maxeke was born in 1871 or 1872, or 1874 remains the problem that is vital in some of this literature.

The other contestation surrounds her birthplace. Other biographers indicate that she was born in Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape Province, the area that raised many finest political elites in South African history. Others contend that she originates from Ga-Matlala/Ramokgopa, Polokwane District (the then Pietersburg) in the Limpopo Province. Academically, the aforementioned numerous claims have been put forward to justify one of the two claims that are both conflicting in Maxeke's biographies. The first claim relates to the justification that her maiden surname originates from the Dwaars River area under the Chief Ramokgopa (Limpopo). However, this claim fails to explain why Maxeke studied in the Eastern Cape as a young woman where she trained and qualified as a teacher under the tutelage of Paul Xiniwe. Xiniwe later recruited Maxeke and Katie to join the Jubilee Singers/The African Choir.

The second claim was a dominating and repetitive issue on Maxeke's biographies relates to how vernacular language and migration from time to time changed and affected how the names of people are written and pronounced. For instance of Maxeke, there are suggestions that her maiden name is contested (nee Manye) and Manny.⁸ In some instances it is written as Manny. Thirdly, it was also interesting to note the existence of different points of view regarding the exact house of Maxeke in Racecourse Township, Kliptown whether it was Stand 7 or Stand 9.⁹ In these biographies, the major absence of Maxeke's life and voice happens in this period (1903-1912) which is followed by her resurrection in the political realm as an observer during the formation of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), later renamed as the African National Congress (ANC).

Hereunder is now the interview section whereby in-depth details and the key voice of Phili on Maxeke will be heard.



Figure 2: Members of Jubilee Singers/The African Choir, 1891, London, South African History Online (Charlotte Maxeke, first woman on the right from front row)

⁸ National Archives Document, Mrs Maxeke Native Welfare Officer, 9/328. In all her documents which include her letters to her death notice from The Prudential Funeral Company, her maiden surname is written as (Manye).

⁹ National Archives Document, Mrs Maxeke Native Welfare Officer, 9/328, See Clark Maxeke minutes (44/15) and correspondence on Mortgage Bonds – Stands 7, 9 and 11 with Native Commissioner, D. Jenner, (2/9/3/14B.) and (No. 581/56).

Exploring the Journey: An Interview with Phili

The interviewer: When was your first encounter with Charlotte Maxeke and how did you go about identifying the sources to construct her biography for the declaration project?

The interviewee: My first encounter was back in the early 1990s while I was still a student at the University of Natal, now University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN), Howard College. I was in the Durban Library when I came across the biography of Katie Makhanya, a sister to Maxeke, written by Margaret McCord titled *The Calling of Katie Makhanya*. This biography was an oral interview and it shed light on the life and activism of Maxeke given her relatively unknown status in the liberation literature at the time. Again, in the same period, I came across postcards that had different women which included Winnie Madikizela Mandela titled *Winnie Mandela the Symbol of Resistance* and Nokukhanya Luthuli titled *Mother of the Nation or Symbol of Courage* if not mistaken. However, there was a complete absence of Maxeke whom I had started to enjoy following reading McCord's biography.

I started questioning her absence and at the time not many students were aware of her, granted that her political activism was mainly in the 1920s as opposed to the popular 1950s protest politics. Also, I believe it might be the political landscape of the 1960s and 1980s that had created such bearing in the exclusion of Maxeke in the liberation historiography and literature at the time. After that, it was between the years (2002 and 2003) when I started working for SAHRA. A colleague of mine and I, now Dr Vusi Khumalo were interested in documenting the history of Kliptown, which was the home to Maxeke and her in-laws. While conducting a walkabout as part of a heritage survey, I came across two of Maxeke's houses. There was contested history as to which property belonged to Maxeke. One was Stand 7 and the other Stand 9, both located in the Racecourse Township, which is a portion of Kliptown, a (historical settlement).

Interestingly enough, the Johannesburg Heritage Agency (JHA) under Erik Itzkinl, the then director had put a marker in Stand 7 which said that the house belonged to Maxeke. The rationale behind this was that house Stand 9 could not meet the old architectural standards compared to Stand 7. In short, Stand 9 had a modern architectural structure according to Itzkinl, and thus, house number 7 was deemed to be the one belonging to Maxeke. Nonetheless, I believe there was insufficient evidence at the time to back up this justification. Coming back to the question of sources, around June 2000, South African History Online (SAHO) was launched and it started by documenting biographies of different South African personalities who had made a significant impact in the history of the country.

With Maxeke's biography, I noticed that the information documented was very scanty and in conflict with the biography of McCord which was an interview and the voice of Maxeke's sister, Katie. For instance, it claimed that Maxeke was born in Ga-Matlala, Pietersburg (Polokwane) now the Limpopo Province. Assumptions were drawn to illustrate the point that she was born in Ga-Matlala by arguing that her maiden surname (Mannya) was of Pedi origin. However, this stood to be opposed by Katie's testimony in her biography with McCord. Katie's account could have been more accurate than that of SAHO. Another important source I consulted was from the Wits Historical Papers. In this source, there was a manuscript by Alfred Bitini "A.B" Xuma, titled, *Charlotte Makhomo Manye Maxeke: What an educated African Girl?* for which William Edward Burghardt "W.E.B" Du Bois, a former teacher to Maxeke wrote a foreword, indicating that he had taught her at Wilberforce University.

Truthfully speaking, there was a less compelling story about Maxeke's activities especially before she had attended the founding of the ANC as an observer and her role as a founder of the Bantu Women's League (BWL). Instead, Xuma had aimed to use Maxeke as motivation for other African women at the time. For instance, Xuma had measured Mrs. Maxeke's greatness along three dimensions: in spurring her example provided to other Africans; in her tireless efforts to serve and uplift the lowly of her race; and in the model of respectability and achievement she presented to white South Africans.¹⁰ In reality, there was

¹⁰ One significant aspect of A.B. Xuma's writing can be also drawn back to the fact that earlier missionary-educated Africans solely saw themselves as apostles of civilization and progress. These missionary-educated African students in most instances will come back and marry each other as was the case of Marshall Maxeke and Charlotte Maxeke. These marriages provided much-needed evidence of how significant it was for these students to remain attached to their assimilative American culture or affiliations. Another example, Ellen Kuzwayo noticed is that these missionary-educated Africans were much concerned about their 'uncivilized' brethren, and they had little faith in their political

less information to be used from these accounts. It was not until the declaration project (of her grave) that some information was brought into the light. While working on this project under Burial Grounds and Graves (BGG) guided by National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999 (NHRA), Section 36, I located Maxeke's grave in Nancefield cemetery in Soweto on the northeast side, which was proclaimed in 1921 before Soweto was established.

People who resided in Orlando, Kliptown, and Pimville's old location were buried in these cemeteries. Next to Maxeke's grave was the founder and Vicar-General of the ANC, Reverend Ngcayiya. Consultations with the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) under the then Secretary-General, Mavivi Manzini, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) were held. The AMEC linked me to the Manny family, and a family elder clarified that the surname is (Manny) not (nee Manye). I believe meeting these people raised further contestation as more information was coming out to clash with what was written in literature. For example, this family elder, a grandfather figure disputed that Maxeke was born in 1874 which in most documents, including surviving documents such as death certificate, show that she was born in 1874.

Instead, the family elder suggested that Maxeke was born in 1872. Another elderly man from the AMEC argued that Maxeke had one child, Clarke Maxeke who predeceased her. To validate these narratives and speculations, I went to the National Archives where I discovered the compiled file on Maxeke which confirmed that Clark died in 1945, 6 years after the death of his mother. This clashed with the testimonies that Clark predeceased her mother, instead, some testimonies had argued that he was the one who died first. I can say more conflicting memories from all interesting parties had reached the primary stage. An oral testimony given by another woman supported the earlier claims by Itzkin that Stand 9 was not Maxeke's house. In this testimony, the woman used to stay in the house (Stand 9) and she confirmed that the house belonged to Jesse Maxeke, the wife to Clarke whom he married in 1940.

Interviewer: Where were the key voices (oral testimonies) emanating from in your assessment given that Maxeke had a very catalytic and compelling story both in South Africa and in the United States of America?

Interviewee: I believe as the project went on, numerous people got interested and started to be willing to come forward and share their stories about Maxeke even though there was no one at the time who had shared the first-hand memory of Maxeke. The Nancefield cemeteries are located near the railway line and on the north side is the (Old Potchefstroom Road) now renamed Chris Hani Road. While the train was passing by, Manzini during the unveiling of the commemorative plaque shared a story of how Maxeke once stopped a goods train, requesting to board one of the carriages to rush for a conference in the Bloemfontein as she had missed the passenger train. Maxeke was wildly celebrated as Winnie Madikizela Mandela drew attention that the ANC in exile, Tanzania to be specific had named it crèche/nursery after Maxeke.

I believe if we had more time, more testimonies were going to come out as many people were interested in the project. Another paramount institution was the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) because at the time I was a student in the institution, thus, it was easy to access information about Maxeke. There was no one interviewed for this project, I mean the documentation part, however, the key voices (oral narratives) emanated from the archival resources. As for the account of Maxeke in the USA, I believe it is very minimal, and no recording that I know that situates her except the foreword by W.E.B. Du Bois. I do not mean to suggest that there is no available work even in the archives in the USA, but I claim this with the conviction of what we have here in South Africa which is limited. One person whom I can associate with Maxeke here in South Africa is Ellen Kuzwayo. The pair met in 1935 during the All-African Convention (AAC), conference in Bloemfontein, and Maxeke was one of the keynote speakers at the conference.

As such, it is practically possible that Kuzwayo would have some oral testimonies of Maxeke as both met during the conference unlike most recent women stalwarts often use or refer to the case of

judgment. For them, political leadership was the province of the uplifted/'civilized'/educated of the representative men and women who already attained the plane of civilization to which the mass of Africans was presumed to aspire.

Maxeke citing hearsays. Evident is the reflections and quotes that Kuzwayo made in her autobiography quoting Maxeke's powerful sentiments during her Presidential Address to the National Council of African Women (NCAW). Kuzwayo wrote:

This work is not for yourselves, kill that spirit of 'self' and do not live about your people, but live with them. If you can rise, bring someone with you (Kuzwayo, 1985).

Writes, Kuzwayo is impressed and fond of Maxeke but there was no properly arranged and documented interview between the two, besides what is written in the autobiographical work of Kuzwayo. I am positive that the pair would have made unimaginable contributions to social and political change in South Africa.

Interviewer: During the time of developing and constructing Maxeke's biography, were any of the family lineages (Maxeke's) that were still surviving whom you considered as [a walking encyclopedia] to attest to family history?

Interviewee: Not that I know. Besides the Manny elder gentleman who was a nephew or whose father was a nephew or cousin to Maxeke. He had some accounts to share with us while we visited him in his home. The old man confirmed that Maxeke was born to a Pedi father and a Xhosa mother. She was born in Fort Beaufort in the Eastern Cape. Her father had left Limpopo to buy ammunition because of the wars of resistance to colonialism back in Limpopo. However, his father opted to settle in the Eastern Cape and start a family. Consequently, Maxeke studied in the missionary school in the Eastern Cape before heading to Port Elizabeth where she trained as a teacher and taught in Kimberley after her family moved there.

In Kimberley, she joined the music choir under Paul Xiniwe who had earlier taught her in the Eastern Cape and as a choir, they toured Britain along with Katie who was a member of the choir as well. While she was studying abroad at (Wilberforce University), her family went back to Limpopo, and that was how the confusion of her birthplace might have occurred. I was critical of the testimonies as I had earlier learned that some archival resources were in direct conflict with what the family old man was saying. For example, the old man had claimed that Maxeke was born in 1872, meanwhile, the records indicate 1874, including her death certificate. Again, she and Clarke had signed her maiden surname as Manye in the archival resources found at the National Archives.

Interviewer: What were critical and crucial moments for you in this project given that you worked with numerous people including the then Minister of Arts and Culture?

Interviewee: Firstly, it is essential to note that the then Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana had announced in parliament during her maiden speech that the graves of Charlotte Maxeke, Lillian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, and Rahima Moosa were to be declared as heritage sites. So, our duty as SAHRA was to respond to the call by the Minister. Subsequently, I compiled a plan for the project of these women who played significant roles in the history of South Africa. Again, I consulted Bertha Gxowa of AMEC Mother's Union which was one organization Maxeke founded. However, Gxowa was displeased and vehemently opposed to the declaration of the Maxeke gravesite as a national heritage site because of its then-current state that did not meet the stature of a leader of Maxeke calibre. The portion of the cemeteries was neglected as it was no longer used for burials and there was a footpath that passed alongside her grave.

After our discussion with her, I intended to propose to the Johannesburg Parks Department for possible assistance to plant trees and make the gravesite more attractive to many people and ensure it was not abandoned. One phenomenon that was outstanding for me during the project, was the absence of the cemetery register surviving as an archival resource to locate cemeteries and who is buried where. The registers (archival resource) containing such information were burnt to ashes when the fire was set on the offices during the 1976 riots and thus, locating some cemeteries was a very difficult exercise. For example, to date, there is no information as to where Marshall Maxeke, husband to Charlotte Maxeke, and their son Clarke were buried.

A day before the declaration, the then SAHRA Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Miss Sibongile Van Damme said to me that the Minister had called her to challenge the narrative that Maxeke was born in the Eastern Cape, instead, she insisted that Maxeke was born in Limpopo. I also insisted that Maxeke was born in the Eastern Cape and advised that any reference to her birthplace should be left out. The

following day during the morning visits to the family homes of Lillian Ngoyi and Maxeke, there was an elder of the family who confirmed that indeed Maxeke was born in Fort Beaufort, in the Eastern Cape. Before the declaration, a few women stalwarts including Bertha Gxowa, Grace Shope, and Sophia Williams de Bruyn one of the leaders during the women's march in 1956 were interviewed for the documentary, 'Heroine of Our Time' in our project.



Figure 3: Charlotte Mannya Maxeke's gravesite, in Nancefield cemeteries, National Heritage Site Declaration, 20 July 2010.

(The following two sets of questions do not relate to the question of Maxeke, instead, they sought to introduce the next and last segment of this paper; the importance of theoretical uses of oral tradition).

Interviewer: In your own experience, how best (oral tradition) can be used as a means to correct historical distortions and be used as a methodology to enforce historical misrepresentation at large?

Interviewee: I am of the view that (oral testimonies) are a significant part of (oral tradition) because they contributed to addressing or unearthing suppressed histories, particularly of previously disadvantaged groups which include (women's histories, people of colour, historical settlements, independent churches, labour movements and other important phenomena that are not deemed to be in the mainstream records or resources). Maxeke is no exception to such tradition, it was through the combination of oral testimonies that I uncovered the gap in what then was considered as historical facts in numerous literature and what we could prove as historical facts from oral tradition. To this end, oral tradition as methodology seems still a suitable method to navigate and unearth the social histories or histories from below. I would have liked to see oral history projects and partnerships between universities, municipalities, and local governments themselves taking a strong position in promoting it by documenting oral testimonies to add to the whole of social history that is still not fully exposed.

Interviewer: In terms of conflicting memories on biographies of Maxeke, how did you go about negotiating or rather validating such facts? This question relates to the theoretical underpinning of the project, was it based on the traditional history of facts and personalities or constructing viewpoints of the silent majority as new cultural history from below which informs social history?

Interviewee: I would suggest that the project managed to deal with revealing facts to construct an accurate biography of Maxeke. In other words, the theoretical understanding was not something we were keen on addressing at the time. The project was rather a quest for facts and ensuring that the final product was to

be backed by available records (oral testimonies) which were available at the national archives. The motive behind this was to steer and shape a genuine biography instead of diverging to subjectivities that had previously distorted facts in the existing biographies or literature. However, I am not disputing the relevance of testimonies of the silent majority as they play numerous roles not only in constructing viewpoints from the below but equally contributing to the transfer of intergenerational knowledge. Here I mean that information could have been passed down from generation to generation. In the case of women's struggle for liberation, women could have exchanged knowledge about histories of each other to raise awareness. For instance, let us take Bathabile Dlamini since she was privileged enough to have met and listened to Dorothy Nyembe; while Nyembe was privileged to have worked with Bertha Mkhize since she was active in local politics in the 1920s and it is likely Mkhize had met Maxeke since women politics and incidents of political resistance was localized at the time.

On the uses of oral tradition and technique of its methodological expediency

Regardless of how the above interview has established the problems that emerged with conflicting memories of oral tradition leading to the biographies/literature of Maxeke, the authors want to pay attention to what is called oral tradition expediency. Not to dispute the debates about its relevance and methodological failures/crises, our emphasis here is that oral tradition is largely shaped and grounded in memory, and memory is a subjective instrument for recording the past in the individual psyche. This explains the urgent need for rethinking its technologies and techniques to avoid its decadence. Given the above, oral tradition can be understood as a methodological practice to obtain historical accounts.

The authors specifically opted for the usage of the term 'methodological' to refer to the procedures that inform the oral tradition. Thus, the authors decided to supplement these contentions by using Marietjie Oelofse and Derek du Bruyn's thesis in the paper titled *'The importance of oral history in a transforming South Africa'*.¹¹ It is from their thesis that an emphasis is made on the theoretical significance of oral tradition. As it has been fairly enunciated in the above interview, oral tradition as a methodology does not claim exclusivity but relates to the techniques and technologies if carefully utilised in the historical sense. Oelofse and du Bruyn contend that this could be a valued contribution by supplementing and enriching the written record.¹² Thus, this paper claims that its expediency should be grounded on the technique. Furthermore, it is the very same technique that offers a distinctive way of obtaining access to information by using the human memory as a historical source and resource.

Oral tradition should be viewed as a democratic tradition that promotes social history or history from below.¹³ The centring on oral tradition as a methodology with careful consideration of its techniques allows the binary processes of (discovery) of oral history as a historical source and (recovery) of oral history as a restorative project of histories. Oral tradition as democratic tradition reinforces the study of social history. The shift that oral tradition methodology brings to the fore should be appreciated as it allows unearthing the histories of 'ordinary people' not only in great men's approach. By the term 'democratic tradition' in history, the authors imply the shifting not only from political to social history but also cover the shifting geopolitical history and landscape to local history.¹⁴

South Africa is one typical example that requires a shift to this democratic tradition espoused by oral tradition with the hope of redressing the crises of the social histories of (ordinary people). This is due to the dispelled years of reigns of kings, colonialism, apartheid regime, and postcolonial imagination of reconstructing and marking some histories as greater than others with the assumption of state building, stability, and saints to reconcile in their names. Oral tradition becomes a valuable resource to the methodology of history that closes the period of decadence in a more socially orientated form. Moreover, oral tradition ultimately generates an intimate view of the histories from below by describing events and further moves to record such information to formulate what could be understood as social history.

¹¹ Marietjie Oelofse and Derek Du Bruyn, "The Importance of Oral History in a Transforming South Africa," *Journal for Contemporary History* 29, no. 1 (2004): 151–69.

¹² Oelofse and Du Bruyn, "The Importance of Oral History in a Transforming South Africa."

¹³ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁴ Barbara Allen Bogart and William Lynwood Montell, *From Memory to History: Using Oral Sources in Local Historical Research* (Michigan: American Association for State and Local History, 1981).

Flowing from the above, it is essential to argue that the relationship between oral tradition and written sources, together form a harmonious union, offering objective interpretation based upon sound evidence, and the other giving a personal immediacy, a sense of being there and of participation. To reiterate this point, the above interview proves to be a prime example as Phili was navigating through oral testimonies that sought to redress some of the misconceptions about Maxeke. However, these were to be properly guided by oral traditional written accounts from archival resources.

CONCLUSION

The journey of Phili in attempts to build the biography of Maxeke towards the declaration of her gravesite as a national heritage site necessitated the need for engaging oral tradition and equally re-thinking its technologies and techniques because it is from those accounts that South African historians and scholars of liberation history can establish and expand the historian's database. Through this paper, it has been shown that oral testimonies themselves can be embodiments of experiences that give voice to the everyday life of ordinary people. Oral tradition in its rightful perspective does not only deal with subjectivities as is often the case. However, it contributes to democratic aspirations in 'histories from below' and makes a social contribution by bringing dignity, justice, and respect to ordinary people's histories. In other words, oral tradition becomes a humanizing trajectory and necessitates that scholars on liberation history re-think and reintroduce its pedagogics, not only in the academy but also as public discourse.

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