



“Seeking Information from the Lips of People”: oral history in the archives of Qatar and the Gulf region

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Abstract

The turn to oral history in Qatar and the Arabian (also known as Persian) Gulf is not a rejection of traditional archival authority as has been the case in other parts of the world. In the Gulf, oral history has been embraced out of a desire to fill the silences of the largely unwritten record attributable to previous low levels of literacy and strong oral traditions in the region. Today, oral history is seen as the best method to capture details about traditional ways of life during the pre-oil era. After discussing archival concerns about the evidentiary nature of oral histories, this paper explores how it has come to be a crucial documentation tool in the Gulf, adapted to the specific nation building and cultural heritage priorities of the region.

Keywords Oral history · Arabian (Persian) Gulf · Qatar · Archives · Heritage

On a central corner in Doha’s Msheireb neighborhood, a sleek modern building adorned with Arabic calligraphy that translates into “National Archives” looks out over a revived traditional open market.¹ The building has yet to be occupied, and its future is not public knowledge—perhaps it will be used to house the government records of the ruling family. The emptiness of the building betrays the frantic pace at which documentation of Qatari history and heritage is being done in the form of oral histories.

One of the earliest uses of oral history (in the USA) was by archivists in an effort to “supplement the records” that too often focused on elites, or to offer explanation for materials already in the physical custody of archives (Swain 2003, p 140). That archivists still have a role to play in oral history becomes apparent after examining

¹ “When one is seeking information from the lips of people, it soon becomes obvious that not everyone, who is old can give reliable information about events and circumstances, which happened in his or her environment and lifetime” (Heard-Bey 2017, p 43).

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the Qatari cultural heritage documentation milieu. There is a relative weakness of archival science and a paucity of professionally trained-archivists and formal archives in a region where oral history is often not supplementing, but rather *producing* the historical record. Oral history has come to be seen as a crucial tool in documenting Arabian (also known as Persian) Gulf history with little concern about the authenticity of the oral record being recorded. As the country moves further away from its desert-dwelling and pearl-diving past, and the generations who knew that way of life pass away, there have been wide scale efforts by a younger generation to document earlier times via oral histories. In Qatar, for example,

[t]here are also attempts to teach oral history as a subject, across disciplines, by both Arabic and Western instructors in schools and universities. Local oral historians have been encouraged and promoted, as local “memory banks,” by bringing their historical versions into the mainstream and allowing for their circulation. (al-Malki 2016, p 253)

Qatar, a small oil and natural gas-rich country in the Gulf, has nurtured oral history into a vibrant, “growing field of study and investigation” (al-Malki 2016, p. 253) particularly with regard to the documentation of local heritage. The evidential nature of these oral histories has yet to come under close scrutiny. This paper endeavors to assess the place of oral history as a documentation method in the Gulf region from an archival perspective taking into consideration specific cultural and social realities.

Oral documents

For Abrams (2014) and presumably other oral historians, challenges to defend oral history “against charges regarding the fundamental ‘unreliability of memory’” (p. 90) are a part of the past. Yet, within the field of archives, where “the record is *the* foundational concept” the traditional, and arguably still dominant idea of a record is that it is a written document or an image that is evidentiary by its nature. This is in spite of the work done by “pluralist and deconstructionist archival theorists,” to challenge “dominant evidence-based definitions of records” (Caswell 2016).

The effort to legitimize the archival use of oral history has produced new terminology related to the audio-historical record. While the written transcript of the oral history interview has the precedent of being respected by archivists as an original document (Swain 2003, p. 142), Galloway (2009) seeking to legitimize the *untranscribed* interview referred to it as an “oral text,” while acknowledging that as a seeming contradiction (p. 66). Turner’s (2012) theorizing about “oral documents” built upon work done by Buckland (1997) on the nature of documents. Turner (2012) extended the “concept of a document to artefacts made available orally” (p. 857) noting that “one can be informed orally,” so she contends, “one can discover a document that is oral by examining practices that involve using orality to convey evidence or to become informed” (p. 855). Indeed Turner (2012) suggested that the further analysis of oral histories might lead to

the development of “additional insight” into “oral documentness” (p 861). Oral historians have long defended the value of the oral on its own merit, considering even transcription to be a “stripping away” of “orality/aurality...in the textual act of archival use and scholarly communication” (Boyd 2015, p. 118).

Alexander (2006) also provides a justification for the use of oral histories in tandem with existing material records. He contends that “oral history, especially when shaped by material evidence, is especially prone to filling in the vacant historical spaces that surrounded all of material history (p. 11).” His argument is, in essence, that written documents do not provide context as to their creation or reception. There are “historical silences” that can be filled by “oral reflection, especially when shaped by material evidences (p. 1).” Therefore, Alexander (2006) suggests a coordination of oral histories with material history in order to expand the cultural context of the written record. His proof of concept for this is his use of material records to provoke memories from informants, asking them to “respond” to the materials. In addition, the noted oral historian Thompson (2000) asks us to acknowledge the social construct of factual evidence, pointing out that primary resources such as census records and marriage certificates were themselves based on interviews.

Archivists, historians, ethnographers, and other social scientists have dealt with a “methodological anxiety” regarding the use of oral history that has led contemporary scholars to “fixate on the documentary and documentable aspects of the spoken past” (Shryock 1997, p 28). For some, the debate can be reduced to a consideration of format (which does not necessarily determine “recordness”) versus content, which should be the determining factor. It goes without saying that not everything written is a record or worthy of being archived (Klopfer 2001).

Within the field of archives, oral history’s “place” has been recognized to be in the realm of community archives, which are typically projects to counter mainstream historical narratives (or lack thereof) done by marginalized groups based on their shared identity (Flinn et al. 2009). Because community archives are often created as opposed to having been accumulated or collected over time (Flinn 2015, p 146), oral history has been integral to many such archives. In fact, Sheffield (2017) attributes the growing prominence of community archives to the “rise of oral history” (p. 352).

As Swain (2003) pointed out, “[t]hose who propose a ‘record-keeping paradigm’,” reject oral histories as archival documents because they do not believe that an oral history is “a transactional record of evidential value [that satisfies] legal requirements of evidence” (p. 147). For such critics, the legitimate and authoritative past is to be found in the archival record where “the authentic [written] document” is conceived of a “as a source and evidence” (Blouin and Rosenberg 2011, p. 31). Yet, in mapping the emergence of the term collective memory, which is often tied to oral history and other community-based archiving practices, Jacobsen et al. (2013) point out that “valuable and recordable memory exists outside [of] archival repositories” and “that [they] persist with or without archives and even despite the archival limitations” (p. 222). Klopfer (2001, p. 119), in detailing the use of oral history in supplementing formal archives in South Africa, says that “[a]s long as oral histories come with enough evidence of their provenance they would seem to be, if not history, certainly appropriate raw material for a history.”

Blouin and Rosenberg (2011) consider social memory's problematizing of traditional archives to itself be problematic *for* archives while at the same time acknowledging that traditional archives do not have the capacity to answer the questions about social processes in the way that they have come to be asked by historians and others. For Klopfer (2001) oral histories are just as heterogeneous as written records but are distinguished from them (and from other oral recordings) by the fact that "they are created explicitly for posterity, usually by an interlocutor and a speaker, and the content is usually related long after the activities in question, based on memory (p 114)." Klopfer (2001) shows that oral histories were seen by some archivists in post-Apartheid South Africa as important foundations for constructing a "new, inclusive national memory (p. 106)" and redressing historical bias in the formal archives.

When oral histories are incorporated into archives, they too require documentation. Fogerty (2006), who refers to oral histories as "nontraditional archival materials," states that "the lasting value of oral history interviews can be realized only if they are...supported by records that faithfully document the context within which they were created" (p. 235). In essence, this entails the creation of a thorough provenance for interviews, explaining the "what, when, where, how and why of its creation" (p. 208). In fact, he goes even further to say that

[o]ral histories that lack such essentials as adequate documentation of the process of their creation, transcripts for each interview, narrator contracts, and other important elements can seldom be considered viable candidates for acquisition. (p. 210)

Oral history in Qatar

In Qatar, a good portion of the recording and storage of oral histories is not community led, but is part of a nation-building project which has transformed the country from an amalgamation of primarily nomadic tribal communities into a "modern state in a matter of decades" (Brewer and Goldman 2010, p. 227). Even when carried out by non-state actors (university students for example), the role of the newly imagined (singular) national "community" tends to loom large. This has implications for the curation and uses of those oral histories. If oral histories are being collected to support a predetermined nation-building narrative, then those oral histories that do not adhere to the narrative—for example that bring attention to disputes considered divisive or unpatriotic—will, most likely, not be heard in the public sphere.

The turn to oral history in Qatar and the Arabian Gulf in general is not a rejection of traditional archival authority as has been the case in other parts of the world. In the Gulf, oral history has been embraced out of a desire to supplement the written record and to fill the silences of the largely unwritten record that has been attributed to low levels of literacy and strong oral traditions historically present in the region. In Qatar and neighboring Gulf countries, it seems that few formal written archives exist to be consulted.

Archivists who are critical of oral history's use in the West might more readily accept the use of social memory in the Arabian Gulf context. Consider the situation in the Gulf where multiple societies, "have very little or no written evidence of most of their history" (Heard-Bey 2017, p. 49). This was the situation Heard-Bey (2017) encountered when she joined the Emirati National Centre for Documentation and Research in 1969. It would officially become the National Archives of the United Arab Emirates with the passing of a 2014 Archive Law. Heard-Bey (2017) clarifies the absence of traditional, government derived archives by explaining that the small tribal units that populated the Gulf region had little need for formal written administration, and therefore did not produce administrative records. She explains:

Even records of financial transactions such as loans and payments were rarely kept in writing -and most of those, which were recorded on paper, did not survive the time because of the adverse climate. The occasional messages between rulers or important letters concerning a legal matter were kept by the family and even now are not in the public domain.

Gulf oral historians have not turned their backs on formal archives nor consciously decided to challenge established archival practices. They have instead sought to create indigenous records where very few could previously be found. Heard-Bey (2017) posits oral history as the place where the historian of the Gulf goes to find the materials needed to answer questions that "pre-date living memory" because "there is so very little locally generated written material in this region, [and] there are no public archives to fall back on..."(p. 49).

The exception to this lack of documentary heritage is the written records about Gulf countries kept by early Christian missionaries to the region (al-Sayegh 2012) and those official documents that sit in the archives of former European colonial powers (Dutch, British, Portuguese, and Turkish) from which "a great deal of the history of the Gulf countries can be extrapolated" (Heard-Bey 2017, p. 49). However, as Moe and Onley (2013) point out with regard to colonial documents, these kinds of records tend to deal with subjects of interest to colonial rulers such as politics and trade and do not generally provide good coverage of local culture. Missionary records while documenting cultural life, do so from an outsider and biased viewpoint. A noteworthy project to facilitate the use of colonial documents is the Qatar National Library partnership with the British Library to digitize the India Office Records which are actually the records of three different organizations "crucial to the British colonial effort in the period 1600–1858" (Brook n.d.). Although the Indian subcontinent was the main focus of the records, they hold valuable information on the colonial dealings in the Gulf which was a strategically important location for the British. Recently, a Qatar-based research institute, the Hassan bin Mohammed Center for Historical Studies has translated some of these records into Arabic and published them in a printed volume (HBMHC 2017).

The growth of oral histories in Qatar, and by extension, the Gulf region as a whole is linked primarily to a deep felt need to document traditional life in the wake of the rapid changes brought to the region with oil wealth. The recollections of traditional life that are captured by oral histories are seen as crucial to combatting a supposed sense of identity loss western scholars have attributed to being brought

on due to the drastic change in living conditions and the overwhelming presence of foreign nationals who presently make up the majority of the population, outnumbering natives in most Gulf countries (Geraci 2009). Al-Shamlan (2019) contends that the idea of a post-oil identity crisis is a western construction not in accordance with the actual Qatari experience. Nevertheless, oral histories in the region have not been done solely for the sake of reminiscence; they have also been used for such purposes as the documentation and recreation of water wells in Qatar (Qatar Museums n.d.) and to document early culinary habits and female life in the United Arab Emirates (Hill 2017).

Gulf-based oral histories can also provide valuable information for scholars of the region. Lawson (2001) identified five areas: “popular consciousness,” “societal transformation,” “the legitimacy of rulers,” internal “patterns of exchange,” and the “histories of local institutions” in the social history of the former Trucial States, (now the United Arab Emirates) for which he believed that historians would *have to turn to* oral history as an alternative source (p 213). He posited that without the resource of oral history, social historians of the region would remain dependent upon the “documents generated by outside observers as primary sources” (p. 223). Eickelman (2001) saw Gulf oral histories as providing accounts for those practices that were so habitual that they were “taken for granted” and “generally overlooked in the formal histories.” He lists for example “child-rearing, children’s games, local proverbs, marriage practices [and], the use of locally available and exotic herbs for cures prior to the availability of Western-style medicine” (p. 20).

Uses of Gulf oral histories

There are salient examples of the value oral histories add to published accounts of Gulf history. Sonbol (2012), in writing about women’s history in the region, says that “for the pre-oil period in Arabia sources such as poetry, travelers’ accounts and oral memory are particularly useful” (p. 323). She adds that oral histories taken by people who lived during the 1930s when the Gulf faced a severe economic depression “show that the memories of those years continue to be central to the community consciousness of people of the Gulf because of the depression and memories of hunger during that period” (p. 329). Abugideiri (2012) echoes this sentiment when, in documenting the lives of midwives in Qatar through oral testimonies, she explains that “oral history proves to be an effective methodological approach to the study of Arabian women that partially redresses the problem of written sources” (p. 170).

A notable initiative to gather oral histories in the region began with the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) Gulf Arab States Folklore Centre in 1983. Varisco (1989) says that its establishment was an attempt to capture the memories of a pre-modern and pre-oil wealth way of life that was quickly eroding. Coming just two years after the founding of the GCC itself, the GCC Gulf Arab Folklore Centre was housed in Doha, Qatar, and focused heavily on researching and documenting “folk literature, musical and dance traditions, customs, and material culture” (p. 158).

The work of the Folklore Centre built upon the Gulf's "rich oral tradition," that had up until then had "limited transference ...to the written page" (Geraci 2009, p. 54). Shryock (1997), who extensively studied the modern-day writing down of Bedouin oral traditions of Jordan, argues that the Arab tribal oral tradition rests in the shadow of official written accounts, be they of the current nation state, historical religious scholars, or colonial powers. A 2014 conference on the role of oral history in the Arab world which was inspired by the revolutionary "Arab Spring" events intended to "fill a gap in the Arab practice of history so as to give oral testimony the chance to become history" (Doha Institute 2014). A repeated theme at the conference was the ongoing tension between the oral and the written historically and in the modern Arabic speaking world where there exist issues of diglossia, cultural biases toward the use of dialects, and a dominant idea of the superiority of classical written language.

The recording and collection of field interviews was integral to the work of the GCC Gulf Arab States Folklore Centre. Six years after the opening of the Centre, Varisco (1989) wrote that

[f]ield interviews are for the most part recorded and transcribed. The current holdings of the center include about 1550 audio cassettes of field interviews and music...The archives of the center include some 250 VHS video cassettes of field research and about 165 Beta cassettes (p. 158).

Varisco (1989) also noted that the original research and interviews done by the Centre were often used to produce scholarly articles for the journal, *al-Ma`thurat al-Sha`biya* which published, both in the Arabic and English languages "articles related to the folklore or material culture of the region" (p. 163).

According to cooke (2014), the sentiment that Varisco credits with establishing the GCC Folklore Centre, may just be that of modern Gulf Arabs "longing for a past that never was" (p. 118). She notes that the modern recreations of the Gulf past are often detached from the realities of the poverty and hardships of pre-oil life in the region. Yet, non-nostalgic oral histories would be as al-Malki (2016) described, "serious attempts ...to record oral traditions, including folktales and historical narratives (p. 253)," and might go a long way in counteracting sentimental remembrances.

While Cook (2001) saw archives moving away from statist, power-based structures in post-modernity and toward a collective, memory-based structure, this has not been the case in the Gulf. The "active commitment by the state to collect oral history" that Klopfer (2001) discusses in post-apartheid South Africa calling it "nearly unprecedented" does not seem exceptional when compared to the situation in the Gulf. In the Gulf, where heritage is a project of the nation state (al-Malki 2016), oral history narratives can go through selective recording and purposeful curation. Oral history as a state project means that in the case of Qatar,

the Ministry's heritage department is in charge of preserving the "Qatari Arab Islamic heritage" through collecting oral histories (the Ministry has hundreds of recordings), creating a national archive, and reviving popular heritage through events held all year around" (p. 264).

This is not to downplay the multitude of private citizens, primary schools, universities, and others who undertake oral history projects regularly in Qatar. Indeed, al-Malki (2016) notes the ways in which “oral histories present comparable and in some cases competing accounts to those of the history textbooks and state narrative” (p. 253). But for the most part, what makes it into the public domain adheres to the narrative framework already set by the state. As Fromherz (2012) explains, “the ruling family and the leaders of individual Qatari tribes manage their history and historical myths carefully (p. 160).” The authority vested in archivists in traditional archives has in the Qatari and general Gulf context been translated into the authority of the nation and its oral historians holding accessioning and curatorial authority over the oral record. In the Gulf, this means the centering of oral histories on the common themes of “nomadic life, traditional skills [such as pearl diving, animal husbandry, etc.] and folklore” (Teskey and Alkhamis 2016, p. 115).

Oral histories in the museums

It is in museums that government narratives take physical form. For national museums, the government’s narrative about the nation is tightly weaved into exhibits assigning patriotic value to the objects that they house or reference. These objects “speak” to the audiences while also being “spoken for” through the curatorial explanations that accompany them. Al-Mulla (2014) is clear to point out that the establishment of the first Qatar national museum in the 1970s was, for the ruling Emir, Sheikh Khalifa, “as important as administrative and legislative reforms” because it was seen to be an embodiment and tool of his political power (p. 124). Crystal (1990) mentions tangentially that the “oral narratives,” which were gathered by Khalifa’s 1973 Commission to build the original Qatar National Museum, were irreconcilable with official establishment discourse on Qatar.

The as-yet-to open new Qatar National Museum will be a house of oral histories. While the original Qatar National Museum held primarily “ethnographic and archaeological collections,” in the new 430,000 square-foot building, a large amount of space is being apportioned to oral histories with visitors being able to both listen to as well as to record their own histories. In Qatar, which has repeatedly been declared to be lacking in historical artifacts (Cooke 2014; Cooper and Exell 2016) at least within the public domain,² oral histories, presented in audio and audiovisual form, are a core anchoring feature in museum exhibits. Teller (2014) explains that for the new national museum:

[R]esearchers have gone out into the back streets and the villages to talk to those who remember the way things used to be. They’ve so far gathered

² Personal communication with museum experts as well as the success of Qatar Museum’s *Mal Lawal* project point to the richness of private collections in some Gulf countries. There is hesitancy, however, among private collectors to provide access to their collections.

around 150 interviews, men and women, Qataris and foreigners, some on video, some audio, and a few – since, for reasons of cultural modesty, some Qatari women refuse to allow their voice to be recorded– only in transcription.

For cooke (2014), these oral histories are “intangible” substitutions for material objects because “Qatari culture, with its impoverished pearling and nomadic history, has few material objects of great interest” (p. 82). However, the head of Qatar’s Msheireb Museums, Hafiz Ali explains it differently. “We do not focus too much on artifacts, the focus is on stories and the memories of the past [because] [t]his is what we need to tell the new generation,” he says (Aguilar 2015).

Msheireb Museums consists of four traditional houses of elite families that were turned into museums in the celebrated and recently gentrified Msheireb neighborhood of Doha. Each house-museum represents a stage in Qatar’s history (Cooper and Exell 2016). Msheireb Properties, which manages the museums, has its own collection of video oral histories from which relevant narratives are chosen to complement the ongoing exhibits throughout the Museums. The collection of oral histories in this case, is in line with the requirements given by Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, the chairperson of both Qatar Foundation and Msheireb Properties, who wanted the museums to be places that facilitated the “sharing of experiences” and that made “use of personal narratives” (Cooper and Exell 2016, p. 377). It should be noted, however, that when planning the Bin Jelmood House-Museum on the history of slavery in Qatar, the museum team, while able to locate people associated with the local slave trade, was only able to find one person willing to go “on record” due to sensitivities regarding skin color, African origin, and national belonging that have not yet been addressed openly in Qatar. Cooper and Exell (2016) describe the experience as such:

The museum’s oral history unit would spend a great deal of time discussing the subject [with potential informants], but on only one occasion was the team permitted to record and use the conversation: the testimony of Fatima Shaddad, a well-known actress and singer of extraordinary charisma. She spoke emotionally and directly about her parents’ capture in the horn of Africa and their trip across the Hejaz to the Emirates and, ultimately Qatar (p. 378).

Shaddad’s oral testimony is displayed in the museum in a video format with a close-up on her face. In it, she refers to the use of oral histories in the museum as a form of “venting” that is beneficial because of the lasting pervasiveness of racism. The palpable emotion of her testimony contrasts noticeably from that given decades earlier by a woman named “Zalikhah” who had herself been enslaved in Qatar. Zalikhah told her story to Helga Graham (1978) who collected Qatari oral histories in the book, *Arabian Time Machine: Self Portrait of an Oil State*. Zalikhah’s testimony centers primarily on daily life and contrasts the change in social mores over time. She brings up her having been a slave peripherally, saying “In the past some people also had servants who were slaves. I personally had an aunt [i.e., owner/master]...” (p. 167). Similar to Shaddad, she links her family’s bondage to a need to settle a

debt, but her transcript is a stark contrast to the energized account of painful family dissolution shared by Shaddad in the museum exhibit.

Fortuitously, the use of oral histories in museums actually fits the proclivities of Gulf visitors who are less inclined to consult written exhibition materials. Erskine-Loftus (2013) identified a Western proclivity for the visual over the oral in museums, “irrespective of the information the object could communicate through sound” (p. 476). This is not the situation in the Gulf where the integration of orality via oral history exhibits in museums has been called a “brilliant strategy to address concerns about how to develop museums that reflect Gulf region heritage and culture” (Schwarzer et al. 2013, p. 215). Bull and al-Thani (2013) go so far as to say that the Qatari and Emirati families visiting museums went to “great lengths to avoid reading the panel.” Instead, “families preferred to engage with exhibits through conversation either amongst themselves or with staff” (p. 334).

Outside of museums, there is a surplus, perhaps even an excess, of oral history projects on Qatar. Government ministries, public and private institutions of learning, sports and media organizations, cultural heritage centers, and people with tribal affiliations have all undertaken oral history projects in Qatar. For example, the former GCC oral history collection mentioned earlier in this paper is now housed at the Ministry of Culture, just one of many such collections in its custody. Cultural centers such as the Hassan Bin Mohammed Center for Historical Studies and the Qatar Heritage and Identity Centre have also carried out oral history projects and retain their recordings. When Qataris, as private citizens, have undertaken oral history projects these have tended to focus on their own (extended) family or tribal histories in attempts to know “what things were like back when.” Such projects go toward filling the “surprisingly impoverished ethnographic literature” record for Qatar that Alshawi and Gardner (2013) attribute to its society having historically had a “somewhat insular and closed” nature (p. 47).

Oral histories have especially been promoted by the Western universities that have satellite campuses in Qatar. Texas A&M Qatar maintains the qatarhistories.org website, a student-centered project, which posts and solicits new oral histories about life in the country. It says that it aims to fill the spaces between the major historical events in the country with information not found in “most history books,” by providing narratives on “what Qatari people inherited from their ancestors” (Qatar Histories n.d.). University College London—Qatar’s Origins of Doha Project (originsofdoha.wordpress.com/oral-histories/) has gathered “oral histories relating to the development [of Doha] ...and its transition from a traditional settlement into a modern city.” According to its website, this has involved the collection of new oral histories by project staff while also “trawling recordings and transcripts collected in previous interviews” now housed in government ministries (Origins of Doha n.d.). Perhaps some well-connected academics are allowed access to such collections, but in general the most well-known collections of oral histories are not necessarily accessible to researchers or the general public. It should be noted that the oral histories researchers in the Gulf collect for their own thesis and dissertations, and which may only be partially treated or cited in what they eventually publish can also be counted in the vast corpus of untouched Gulf oral histories that have for the most part gone silent (Shopes 2002).

The extent to which oral history is the most appropriate medium to document Gulf life has been called into question. Exell & Rico (2013) point out that oral history projects:

follow established Western methodologies of documenting, classifying and ordering, which, though necessary, can lead to the replacement of one set of culturally specific meanings with new meanings through re-contextualization. In addition, while the documenting of archives, sites and oral histories creates an essential resource for further research in certain areas, [they do]... not create a representative archive of the entirety of heritage practice and conceptions in Qatar, whose forms may elude such methods of documentation (p. 679).

Of course not all oral histories are created equal and are of similar value to the historical record. Shopes (2002) differentiates three kinds of oral histories: the locally generated which tends to “rest on naïve assumptions about what properly constitutes history” (p. 591) and are “celebratory and ahistorical” (p. 592); those generated through scholarly inquiry that can sometimes be too “narrowly focused” because they are “shaped by the investigator’s very specific research questions.” These interviews are often of little interest to those who are interested in topics or lines of inquiry which differ from the scholar. The third kind of oral history, which she also identifies as the “most useful extant interviews for historians,” is those which are “conducted under the auspices of ongoing oral history research programs as archival projects for the use of future researchers or by professionally run historical organizations as documentation projects” (p. 592).

Ideally, the interviews that make up a “national” corpus of oral histories represent the “large cross-section of society” that Geraci (2009) says would be needed in order to “provide scholars a sizeable sample of evidence to glean for the assessment of their reliability and meaning of the stories that will be used to help fill gaps in the written record.” Green (1997) also stresses the need for oral testimonies to represent a “diverse range of experience” (p. 419) while balancing representativeness; with Thompson (2000) considering representativeness to be an “essential” characteristic that must be prominent if oral history “is to realize its potential” (p. 152).

If oral histories are to be accepted as evidence in the archival sense (although this may not be a priority for those making the histories), the degree to which an individual story provides “reliable information on the historical experience, and the degree to which that individual experience is typical of its time and place” (Lummis 2006, p. 255) has to be clear. Those evaluating and interpreting oral histories have to be able to differentiate between unique and representative accounts. This is probably easiest done when evaluating a corpus of histories centered on a common theme. In such instances, as Shopes (2002) points out, “a body of interviews, thoughtfully considered, can open up an understanding of the local culture...give coherence to individual stories, and perhaps extend outward to a larger significance (p. 597).” This is in line with Geraci’s (2009) proscription for what should be the next stage for scholars of and in the Gulf region. He proposed that they look at oral histories collectively and then mine them in order to find “the textual meaning of past traditions in the body of interviews completed (Geraci 2009, p. 54).” Oral historians have

known for quite some time that, as a research method, oral history is good at finding meaning (Portelli 2015; Thompson 2000) and at helping to understand motivations, “the internal events never committed to print” (Yow 2006, p. 436).

Evaluations of oral history collections could include analysis of how the memories themselves were produced (Abrams 2014) in addition to examinations of the validity and representativeness of the individual oral histories (through comparing multiple interviews providing accounts of the same phenomena, quantification, or data triangulation). Abrams (2014) says that analysis of actual memory production “can aid the historian’s understanding of meaning, that is, the significance of the memory story to the narrator and in some cases, to cultural understandings and representations of the past” (p. 97).

A space should also be created to question histories. For, as Eickelman (2001) explains, “the act of recording oral historical accounts, whether of shopkeepers or rulers, involves the transformation of individual memory into a public history that can be examined and contested by others” (p. 28). The appearance of online websites of Qatari and Qatar-based oral histories is one way in which the fixed nature of a story as an official recount is easily augmented by the sharing of the stories in a way that is dynamic and diversifying. The use of digital tools at once fixes narratives in time and space, but also allows for a fluidity (Frisch 2006) that enables them to be easily juxtaposed with other narratives. It is not clear that critical examination and contestation of oral histories is possible now in the Gulf, especially not of those that have been stamped with official approval and said to represent the nation. Considering the strong (but not total) censorship policies present in Gulf nations (Gremm et al. 2018), narratives critical of formal national memory frames would most likely not find public airing nor favor. Abrams (2014) says that:

[r]emembering is typically conducted using a memory frame, which we might describe as a locus or field which makes remembering possible. This may be constructed by the interviewee in response to the interviewer’s research frame or agenda but will also be informed by public discourse which serves to ‘both define and limit imaginative possibilities’ (p. 95).

This might explain why, for the most part, oral history in Qatar and the greater Gulf region has *not* been used by activists as an empowerment tool for the disenfranchised or for social and political change as Abrams (2016) described occurring in other parts of the world. Indeed, it has been said that Qatar lacks “critical historical scrutiny” at an academic level, the use of which could be seen as a threat to the unity of the population (Fromherz 2012, p. 160). Although there is great diversity among the native Qatari population which is composed of people from various ethnic groups, tribes, and religious sects, “internal distinctions amongst Qataris are generally downplayed in official and public discourse and consequently tend to be expressed through informal practices” (Najy 2006, p. 120). Political sensitivities guard what is said and left unsaid publically.

Political sensitivities and Gulf cultural norms are also believed to impact interview relations as well as the ability to use oral testimonies post-interview. An oral historian who works in the region says that the amount of intimacy that has to be

actively developed by interviewers in order to gain access to locals can sometimes be counterproductive. This is because the oral histories become more like intimate disclosures that, even in light of the attainment of written legal consent, can come to be seen by both the interviewer and interviewee as not appropriate for the public or general reuse (Hadeel Eltayeb, personal communication 26 June 2018).

The absence of viable publicly accessible Gulf oral history collections is due to multiple factors, among them: lack of processing (sometimes inhibited by generational changes in dialect (cooke 2014), poor preservation and protectiveness. Protectiveness with oral history collections can be linked to a fear of losing control of the content of the collections, and over the dominant narratives that have been carefully crafted to support each nation's projected image. No institution, especially if it receives government support, wants to risk being tied to counter narratives. However, it is only by providing wider access that oral histories can add value to the historical record. As pointed out by Teskey and Alkhamis (2016), the Gulf region is not lacking in collections of recorded oral histories; however, those institutions housing them rarely make the collection available to the public or even to researchers (p. 118). As for what still remains in private hands (and minds), Fromherz (2012) reports that in Qatar, "archives and oral histories are generally known and they appear occasionally, often in relation to land claims" (p. 160).

Qatar, which has invested heavily in its heritage sector through the development of libraries and museums, has quite shockingly neglected archives with a few exceptions. Some may attribute this to the declared paucity of documentary heritage in the country. The lack of knowledge and application of professional archival standards is already effecting the preservation and access to the multitude of oral histories that have been recorded in the country over the past few decades. Poor processing and preservation means that researchers have for the most part been unable to carry out any in-depth analysis of the multitude of oral history collections dispersed around Qatar. At present, we lack an understanding of the content, subject matter and meanings that could be found in the recordings. Moreover, we do not know the quality of the existent recordings, or even if the earliest cassette tapes are still in viable form. Further research on historical collections of Qatari oral histories, once given access, could provide valuable insights into the extent to which Gulf cultural traits such as reticence and notions of privacy have shaped the actual recorded interviews.

Whether it is seen as restoration or reconstruction, the tight "embrace" of oral history in the Arabian Gulf has been said to be motivated by a need to "salvage and preserve at least part of their past" (Geraci 2009, p. 61). However, the true preservation of the materials on which the voices are stored has not been as well addressed in most places in the Gulf. Considering how susceptible audiotape is to damage from excessive climate conditions (Fogerty 2006), material conservation, migration, the preservation of cassette tapes, as well as of born digital materials should be one of the more pressing concerns for the Gulf oral history community.

The societies in the Arabian Gulf may not have the privilege of the questioning of the historical validity of oral histories and their place in formal archives. They are carrying out a relative cultural triage project to salvage what can be reasonably known about their past. Their work, outside of formal archival constraints, is not done in opposition to formal archival procedures, but for the purpose of addressing

deep desires to know the past in the face of silences and lacunas. At a recent event on community archives in Doha, a Qatari woman expressed that she “wished” she could see the photographs from the day her grandmother married. When asked if such photographs exist, she replied in the negative, but she *wished* that they existed. It is to this ravenous longing for knowledge about the past that oral histories in the Gulf speak.

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