

## An Attempt to Establish an Oral History Project in the University of Zambia Library, Lusaka Campus

AUGUSTINE W.C. MSISKA

In 1979 Mr. Andrew Rooke, then assistant librarian in charge of the University of Zambia Library's Special Collections Division at Lusaka Campus, initiated an oral history project under the title *Development of a Special Collection of Oral History Archives as a Research Resource in the University of Zambia Library*. He later co-opted the author of this article into the project, which was not only the first library project to have the blessing of the University of Zambia's Senate Research Grants Committee, but also the first one to receive financial support from an outside body—the Swedish Agency for Research Co-operation with Developing Countries (SAREC).

This article briefly reviews the University of Zambia's Oral History Project since its inception in 1979, examining the progress that has been made, the problems encountered, and the project's future.

The project was allotted the sum of K10,850 (10,850 kwacha) from SAREC.<sup>1</sup> This money was to be used for purchasing a wide range of equipment—tapes, tape recorders, projector, microphones, and headphones. Whereas some of this equipment was intended to be loaned to bona fide researchers, other equipment was supposed to facilitate transcribing and archiving completed oral history projects in the library.

The purchase of the equipment was only one part of the project. The other was the compilation of bibliographies of completed oral history projects in the country that would, among other things, avoid

duplication of research among researchers. To this extent, two volumes of bibliographies were planned: Volume 1, *Taped and Transcribed Projects*, and Volume 2, *Comprising Summaries, Oral Traditions and Other Sources*. Furthermore, the bibliographies were to be updated or revised so as to keep pace with the future expansion of the project.

The project team expressed concern that bona fide researchers, more especially foreigners, who conducted oral interviews, did not deposit their work or duplicates thereof (as tapes and transcripts) with the National Archives of Zambia, the only institution enjoying the legal depository privilege in the country, or the University of Zambia Library, the designated National Reference Library for Zambia. Thus, the oral history project was implemented to arrest this loss of cultural documentation.

Upon SAREC's promise of funds for the acquisition of audiovisual equipment, bids were invited from manufacturers or suppliers of such equipment at home and abroad, including the main item of equipment, the Neal Ferrograph SP 7 Tape Recorder Model 7922M/B/C-CIR, and its accessories. After an unsuccessful attempt to acquire the equipment locally—which would have had the one great advantage that it could be serviced on the spot—overseas suppliers were approached.

The immediate problem encountered in purchasing the equipment was that the original quotations has been based on 1978 prices. Because of the time lag, by

<sup>1</sup>The Zambian Kwacha is a floating currency related to Special Drawing Rights. In 1980 one Kwacha equaled \$1.29.

the time the funds became available the prices for the various items had increased. Thus, the only alternative was to delete some of the items from the original recommended list. When even this exercise—which resulted in removing a large number of vital spare parts from the original equipment list—did not help much, an appeal was made for additional funds.

The other problem lay in the process of gaining approval for the equipment orders. Orders had to be submitted to the University of Zambia's Research Secretary's Office (under the Vice-Chancellor's Office), from which they were transmitted to the National Council for Scientific Research (a quasi-government body). The latter in turn passed the order on to the National Commission for Development and Planning (under the Ministry of Finance), which administered all the SAREC funds. The National Council for Scientific Research also worked hand in hand with the Bank of Zambia, which issued Letters of Credit. As can be seen, this bureaucratic procedure in itself constituted a very serious set of delays. Naturally, such

delays in approving the orders contributed to paying exorbitantly for some of the items because of price increases.

Nevertheless, despite these problems, by January 1982, the library had managed to acquire for its oral history project the equipment listed in Table 1.

It must be noted in passing that in acquiring these items for the project the two researchers relied heavily on the expertise of Mr. Mathew Nguni, chief technician in the University of Zambia's School of Education. Not only did he provide invaluable assistance, but he also managed to maintain the researchers' morale whenever it threatened to go into the doldrums. Some advice was also sought from the library's own chief photographer, Mr. Y. Walusiku. Incidentally, the University of Zambia Library, Lusaka Campus, has a strong photographic and reprographic unit. The library did not have, and still does not have, a qualified audiovisual specialist among its professional staff.

The next step regarding the equipment was the formulation of special regulations governing the loan of equipment, most especially the tape recorders, to

**Table 1**

<b>Equipment for Oral History Project</b>		
	<b>Unit Price</b>	<b>Total Price</b>
1 Bell & Howell Sound/Slide Projector	K1,284.02	1,284.02
5 Bell & Howell Cassette Tape Recorders Model 3196x	384.79	1,718.95
6 Headphones, Type 45554	15.63	93.78
5 Microphones, Type 707253	23.50	117.50
20 C-90 Cassettes	4.95	99.00
2 Projection Lamps for Sound/Slide	39.45	78.90
1 Technical Manual for S/C 7 3196	N/C	N/C
1 Ferrograph SP 7 Tape Recorder with its ancillaries	5,331.90	5,331.90
<b>Total</b>		<b>K8,724.05</b>

bona fide researchers. Researchers in need of tape recorders would be allowed to borrow them from the library and return them at the end of their research, thereby putting the library in a better position for acquiring tapes and transcripts made by researchers.

Thus, the library researchers, working hand in hand with the library administration, came up with draft regulations, which were in turn circulated to the relevant schools of the University of Zambia. It was imperative that the library take into account comments from such schools or departments as history and literature and languages that were likely to make use of the tape recorders.

As pointed out earlier, the other part of the project was the compilation of a two-volume bibliography of oral history projects in Zambia. The aim was, among other things, to produce bibliographies which would indicate research that had been done, thereby avoiding unnecessary duplication. Indeed, the importance of compiled bibliographies to researchers cannot be overemphasized. In this regard one is reminded of Professor Keith Rennie's acknowledgement of bibliography as one of the contributions made by librarians towards the development of an infrastructure for historical research.<sup>2</sup>

The designation of SAREC funds for the acquisition of audiovisual equipment specifically meant that the project's researchers had no travel funds enabling them to go outside Lusaka and research oral history materials that had been deposited in the various institutions of the country, such as libraries, museums, and private homes. It became necessary therefore, to confine research to the University of Zambia, Lusaka Campus Library itself and its Institute for African Studies, and to the National Archives of Zambia.

The problem of inadequate funds was compounded by the lack of time for researchers to go out and either conduct their own interviews or locate completed projects. To solve this particular problem, a questionnaire was distributed to institutions and individuals in and outside of Zambia. For example, the National Archives of Malawi and Zimbabwe were contacted since these countries have quite a great deal in common with Zambia, including languages, culture, and history. Relevant schools within the University of Zambia were also contacted.

The first volume of the bibliography, *Taped and Transcribed Projects*, was ready by 1981. Due to a shortage of time and manpower in the library, volume 2 has been delayed. The second volume includes material derived from oral traditions or syntheses.

Oral history librarianship is relatively new not only in Zambia, but in many countries of the world. Even the reputed Columbia University's Oral History Project came into existence under the leadership of Professor Alan Nevins only in 1948 and 1949. Columbia University's project influenced the establishment of others—for example, at Cornell University (agricultural history), the University of Hawaii (labor history), and the University of California at Santa Cruz (forest history). Yet it was only in 1966 that the University of California at Los Angeles's Oral History Office organized the first meeting aimed at forming a national body, the Oral History Association. As Fry and Baum point out, "Before then, each person had been operating in a state of insularity, unilaterally learning the new trade by his own trials and tapes. Because there had been little opportunity to profit from the difficulties of other oral historians or to know the kinds of

<sup>2</sup>J. K. Rennie, "The Contribution of Librarians to Historical Research in Zambia," *Zambia Library Association Journal* 10, no. 1 (March 1978): 6.

research in which they were involved, the support was strong for some kind of national organization."<sup>3</sup>

Oral history librarianship has since spread to many other universities not only in America, but also in Europe. As a discipline, it is primarily concerned with the collection and preservation of tape-recorded interviews, regardless of the nature of the subject. It is in this area that the responsibility of pure historians differs from that of oral history librarians. The pure historian is objective in his approach and gathers his data for a specific historical purpose; as Rosen remarks, "The historian. . . is not concerned with future historians who may be using his raw data and, as a result, deals only in terms of his own special problems."<sup>4</sup> The oral history librarian, on the other hand, is concerned with the gathering of data or evidence so that it can be used by other researchers—whether they be historians or sociologists—at any time. By implication, the oral history librarian has to go out and conduct interviews methodically, not only with statesmen, but also with ordinary citizens. As Hartridge noted, ". . . oral history is hailed as part of the new librarian's outgoing policy of actively seeking information, rather than passively arranging it, and of dealing in a wide variety of media."<sup>5</sup>

Today, the medium for preserving oral history is the magnetic audio tape, or typewritten transcripts, or both. Tapes are more valuable because they are more authentic than transcripts. Tapes preserve the personal relationship at the time of the interview, while transcripts do not; however, transcripts allow the researcher to gather essentially the same information in a shorter time. In addition

to personally conducted interviews, the oral history librarian must also collect for use and preservation taped interviews recorded by other researchers. So far, the University of Zambia Library, Lusaka Campus, has confined itself to this latter role. Such a limitation has not been a deliberate policy; on the contrary, the persistent problems of professional staff, time, and finances have enforced it. Thus, although some tape recorders were acquired, the staff have been unable to find time to conduct interviews for deposit in the library. The library's alternative is to keep abreast with researchers in the various fields so as to ensure that they deposit their tapes, or copies of them, and transcripts, if any. Sometimes the library makes copies of researchers' original tapes.

At the same time, the library has also managed to convince its Senate Library Committee to amend the regulation governing the deposit of research materials by its members or staff. Whereas the original regulations did not include tapes, the amendment provided for them. The Senate Library Committee has gone further in recent years, even to the point of de-embargoing the research materials, including tapes, except those which are politically sensitive. Clearance for access to such materials now rests with the campus librarian. This policy has assisted many researchers who would otherwise have been frustrated.

The Oral History Project at the University of Zambia Library, Lusaka Campus, was intended to be ongoing. As can be seen, however, for a very long time the library will continue to rely heavily on materials deposited by outside researchers without itself participating

<sup>3</sup>Amelia R. Fry and Willa Baum, "A Janus Look at Oral History," *American Archivist* 32 (October 1969): 320.

<sup>4</sup>B. Rosen, "Aural History Collections: Time for a Decision," *Australian Library Journal* 23, no. 10 (November 1974): 377.

<sup>5</sup>Digby Hartridge, "Oral History Librarianship," *Rhodesian Librarian* 5, no. 1 (January 1973): 12.

actively in the collection of subjective evidence. What is required—funds permitting—is to have a full-time team engaged in the project. Financial support for the project should not only be sought from outside organizations or institutions, but also from within the institution itself. Such support presupposes, in turn, a clear understanding of the importance of an oral history project within the institution—since charity begins at home, as the saying goes. Admittedly, however, the University of Zambia and the country at large is going through a very difficult financial period, to the extent that the project will not be given top priority at the moment. It is worth emphasizing, nevertheless, that the University of Zambia Library, Lusaka Campus, has made a small, challenging, and important, begin-

ning. Its development will no doubt influence other similar projects in the country just as the Columbia University project did some years ago. It is envisaged that some day Zambian librarians interested in oral history librarianship will come together and form an association with a view not only to exchanging ideas, but also staging concerted efforts to collect raw data in the form of recorded interviews and preserve them for future generations. Indeed, Zambia's great potential in this field needs to be tapped and preserved as part of the country's national heritage. In preparation, librarians should acquaint themselves with both interviewing and recording techniques. Careful planning and study is required. Otherwise oral history will fail to serve as a scholarly tool.