

COLLECTION ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS

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The following are suggestions on recording oral literature texts and traditional ecological knowledge. They are based on the 25 years of experience in the Sabah Oral Literature Project run by Dr. G. N. Appell and Mrs. Laura W. R. Appell and their management of the Fellowship Program in Oral Literature and Traditional Ecological Knowledge of the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research.

The Lead Collector as Outsider: Advantages and Disadvantages

The Lead Collector (hereafter LC), as an outsider, suffers both advantages and disadvantages in establishing a team for collecting oral literature and traditional ecological knowledge. Let us review the advantages first. These are immense. The LC can identify texts which are critical but which the local people may not fully appreciate for their informational or aesthetic value. The LC can see cultural contours that the local people do not fully recognize. For example, the Rungus did not fully understand their land tenure system in terms that would be recognized by the district officer. As a result, the government started land schemes that deprived the Rungus of their lands. The LC can bring skills that the local society does not have. He or she can help with illness or mediating between the local society and the government. In other words, the LC can be of value to the local society. One of the important values is the expression of interest in their culture and the value of it. This helps validate the members of the society when they could be denigrated by agents of change.

The disadvantages are many. The LC may be considered to be wealthy far beyond those of the society he or she is working with. After all, the LC has traveled far to arrive at the research site, which indicates he has financial resources. Therefore, the LC will attract the opportunists from the society first. And these are frequently not the type of solid citizens that the LC would like to work with. The opportunist may be unstable; they may be on the peripheries of their society. They may lack interest in the work of the project beyond their compensation. The first person to aid us when we started working among the Rungus seriously interfered with our work. He told the members of the community

that one of us carried a pistol – a complete fabrication. But this scared away potential friends and sources of information. He was attempting to reserve us for his use and benefit only.

By being perceived as wealthy, the LC is open to all sorts of schemes to relieve him or her of money or goods. Prices for work and resources therefore may rise way above current rates. The LC may be lured into making a cultural error, an indiscretion, so that he can be sued for that. We once helped a man suffering from pellagra go to the hospital. Previously we had stayed out of any discussion of illness or whether an ill person should go to the hospital. We were concerned that our actions might raise significant doubt on how the Rungus themselves handled illness. However, the man who was ill strongly indicated his desire to go to the hospital. We rented a vehicle and took him to it. But he did not stay long there. He left to walk back to the village. He died under a tree on his way back. His wife then sued us for causing his death. Rational argument that we were not involved in his death did not carry the day. After all the hospital is full of the souls of the dead who have not been properly sent to the afterworld. And they can cause illness and death. We had to pay a gong as compensation.

The outside LC can be easily tricked in being offered oral texts for a payment. But these texts may not be an actual text, or a full text. And the source may not be the most skilled in the society's oral literature. That is why it is important to have on the oral literature team individuals you can trust and who will warn you against any stinting or trickery.

The best way of mitigating the disadvantages is to make close friends with some members of the society so that they will protect the LC from schemes, warn him of dangers, advise him on the best way to proceed, and so on.

The Lead Collector and Authority Figures

It is not uncommon for the local people to perceive that the LC is an authority figure, either coming from the government, missionary group, or a development agency. The LC has to work hard to dissipate this view of himself. These types of authority figures should not be present at a recording session. Otherwise, the local people will be reluctant to reveal some of their most critical and revealing texts for fear of being punished or ridiculed for them.

Recruiting a Collection Team

Recruit as a member of the collection team an elder of the community who is knowledgeable in the traditional literature. This individual can quickly locate sources of important oral texts and those individuals who are highly skilled in their performances. This elder can not only direct you to important sources but can also alert the collector as to whether the source is withholding portions of texts. Some sources may feel that by holding back sections it may preserve its efficacy and ritual power.

The other member of the team, possibly a person with some schooling, should be an individual who is capable in managing recording equipment or who can be trained to handle it. He or she should also have the skills to do the transcriptions of the oral texts or the capacity to be trained to do so. This is important as certain linguistic features may be overlooked by an external transcriber. For this position on the team it is important to locate someone who has certain innate linguistic and analytical skills and an interest in the language and the literature.

The advantage of creating such a team and training them is that when the field collector leaves the field site there is a team ready to continue the work of collecting additional oral literature.

Recording Sessions

We have already discussed that it is important in recording texts from a source that those present should only be the members of the Collection Team. When the LC is visiting the field, he or she should also be present. But again, authority figures from outside the local socio-cultural system should not be allowed to be in the audience.

We also have discussed how it is important to collect the recitation of ritual texts without the full performance. While it is also important to record a full performance, such recordings also include a lot of crowd noise, noise from every day activities, noise from domestic animals, and the final squeals of the sacrificial animal.

This makes it very difficult to hear the words during transcription. It is particularly difficult to identify words if the source is chanting the text or is moving about either in trance or as part of the performance.

Equipment

Recording can be done using cassette tapes or a digital recorder. Digital recording is the preferred method. Tape recordings also work well, except in humid conditions where they tend to grow mold. With tapes always wind tapes with a pencil past their leader before starting the recording.

There are high quality digital recorders on the market. Materials should be recorded using a stereo microphone. For digital recordings, files can be uploaded to a computer and converted to formats such as .wav, mp3, etc.

It is best to leave some unrecorded space with tapes or with digital recordings at the beginning and at the end.

For transcriptions of the recordings, there are transcription machines for cassette tapes made by Sony and Panasonic. Transcription machines are also made for computers that will work for digital recordings. All transcription machines will slow down the narrative or rewind for several words which will help the transcriber get all the features of the recording. There are programs, such as ELAN and Transcriber AG, which are being used by many linguists in transcription analysis and are available online.

The Firebird Foundation would prefer to receive digital recordings of the material. If this is not possible we can accept tapes. We can also convert the tapes to digital files for you.

The Oral Literature Collection Processes

Make a rough inventory of the forms of oral literature in the society as a guide for collecting purposes.

Collect various versions of the same text by different people from different constituencies. Also collect the same text from the same source a year or so later. This will reveal the degree to which new creative additions can be made to the text or how

important it is that the text remain in its original form. This may also reveal where there are cultural borrowings. If there are ritual texts that are sung, try collecting first without singing and then with singing. It will be easier to transcribe and translate the recording without the singing.

Text Information

A field journal should be kept for the entry of all recording sessions. This journal should include at least the same information that is put on the introduction of the tape or the recording medium.

Record at the beginning of each item of oral literature:

1. Who is doing the recording
2. Who has come along to help in the recording session
3. Date
4. Where recorded
5. Who is being recorded
6. About what: Name of story, myth, ritual text, etc.
7. Ethnic/linguistic group of person being recorded
8. From whom and where did the person learn the text, etc.
9. Name used by outsiders to refer to the ethnic group, i.e. their exonym

Leave some space at beginning and end without anything on it. If you run out of recording time or tape make sure you have the performer say the last line when you begin with a new recording or tape.

Recording Releases

If the researcher feels that releases would be useful, our lawyer has suggested that you also put on the beginning of the recording the following information:

1. I, [name], agree to have this [name of text] recorded.
2. I agree to have this text translated into English.
3. I give permission for the [text] to be shared with others.
4. If photographing occurs during the recording session add: I agree to being photographed while the [text] is being recorded

Note: In some instances the permission for sharing the text with others may be limited to certain individuals within the community or prohibited. However, the statement should be clear that permission to share the text with others who are not members of the ethnic group is given.

Payment to Sources

Avoid paying cash for recordings, as sources can create new texts just to get paid. Give gifts instead. However, if the text being recorded is one that a specialist uses for ceremonies or for curing which requires a cultural-specific payment for the services, try to find a substitute payment. We have used, in some instances, beads.

Transcribing the Text from Tapes

In transcribing a text, do not use the original as repeated going back to pick up words, etc., not understood, can damage the original. Only use copies in transcribing. Label tapes or other media whether they are original or copies.

Translating the Text

In doing a translation of the source text the method by which the most information is preserved is: a word by word interlineal translation of the source text on the left hand page of the book and a free translation on the right hand page.

Faithful translations are dependent on building a full cultural dictionary from the very start of the inquiry (see article on a cultural dictionary in Menu, Methodological Papers).

Bibliography

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