Place, Memory, Identity – Oral History in the Borderlands

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1. Introduction
Today, there exist many ways to explore political borders, including using such disciplines as geographical, economic and historical studies. But what is absent from many of these discourse, are the localised voices of those directly affected by these borders on a daily basis – the border dwellers. The oral or grassroots history movement, which had stated in the 1960s and 70s in the US, tried to address this shortcoming and began, aided by cheap audio recording devices, to conduct interviews and assemble data libraries. Nowadays, one can observe an unprecedented intensification of media devices used to transmit one's own thoughts to the multimedia world. And the digital revolution has also had an important impact on oral history. Were previous recordings limited to aural archives, now additions to these archives were mostly in a visual format, thereby adding an extra layer of data to be explored.

The projects presented here make use of video interviews in order to gather data. The regions explored were chosen according to their easy comparability. Both Cyprus and Borneo are divided islands, their borders were decreed by colonial powers long gone and their present populations struggle with restless borders. And while the islands are geographically and also culturally worlds apart, the projects evidence that people's daily lives do have much in common and are in many ways controlled by their respective borders. Examples to prove this point are presented below.

2. Cyprus
The Cyprus project used data from an Oral History (henceforth OH) Project conducted from 2009 to 2012 in Cyprus and partly funded by the European Union. The so-called SHARP project (1) aimed at adding its voice(s) to the cultural conversations taking place across the island by making them public. Over 100 interviews were conducted on both sides of the Green Line which since 1974 separates the northern Turkish Cypriot part from the southern Greek Cypriot one. Trouble between the two communities had been brewing even before Cyprus had gained its independence from Britain in 1960 and would still worsen afterwards.

Issues of identity, problematic relationships and differing historical accounts would continue to divide the two communities even today. And while not explicitly discussed here due to space restraints, the overall SHARP project relates to such issues of memory, memorialisation and the search for identity by specifically analysing production settings, processes, the training of interviewers, the interviews themselves and the collective interpretation of this data via new media means and debriefing events.

Interviewees would typically be older members of both communities: the Turkish Cypriots in the north and the Greek Cypriots in the south. Additionally, a member of the Armenian minority living in Cyprus was also interviewed. Of particular interest in the interviews were questions about how individuals from the two Cypriot communities interacted with eachother in the events leading up to the 1974 intervention/invasion of the island by Turkish troops and how these events shaped people's lives and attitudes afterwards.

2.1. Cyprus and the OH Project

The two interviews selected and discussed below were conducted in the autumn of 2011 by one interviewer (the author) and a cameraman as pilots to be shared with the other interviewers. Interviewed were George, a middle-aged Greek Cypriot media worker and Ali, a retired Turkish Cypriot contractor and now a second-hand bookshop owner. The interviewer and the cameraman were both non-Cypriots; the interviewer was of German origin and the cameraman had a Serbian background. As discussed in many ethnographic texts, the relationship between 'foreign' interviewers and local respondents is always fraught with difficulty. (3) At the same time, the foreignness of the researcher might also allow for answers not readily provided to locals. Other project interviews were conducted by Greek and Turkish Cypriots, sometimes in English, sometimes in Greek, sometimes in Turkish. Most of the interviews with Greek Cypriots were, in fact, conducted in English, as were the interviews discussed below. Interestingly enough, English was none of the participants' native language. Also, these were the first or pilot interviews conducted for the OH project, and this explains why there were still sometimes awkward moments when the interviewers did not exactly know how to respond to a given interview situation.

2.2 The first interview: George

George is a seasoned Cypriot media worker in his early 50s. He grew up in Cyprus and then moved to the UK and the USA for study and work. He returned to Cyprus, working in the media industry and has numerous film production and director credits to his name. Among the films he has directed is one which deals with the Cyprus crisis and the events of 1974. Right from the beginning of the interview, it becomes clear that he has an easy rapport with the camera, having worked in front of and behind the camera for many years. Judging by his gestures and occasional frowns, he seemed a bit tired, if not wary at first, but this turned into concentrated and willing collaboration with the interviewer. Indeed, one has the impression that he is relieved to tell his story (once again).

He begins his story with life in the early 1970s but then very quickly moves onto the traumatic events of 1974. He recounts his childhood memories of the war and of hearing enemy airplanes passing above. After the end of the war, the airport in Nicosia was closed for civil aviation and nowadays it is very rare to hear an airplane crossing the sky over Nicosia. George states that he had forgotten this episode until he went to London, and for the first time in a long while he was confronted by airplane noise.

His statement is an ample reminder that specific memories (autobiographical/traumatic) consist of both psychical and social elements, which are oftentimes combined, as in this case. In his answers, George dispels the myth that all the people were mostly afraid of the 'Turks'. For him the fear of EOKA B, a Greek Cypriot paramilitary shaped after EOKA A, which had fought the British in the Cypriot anti-colonial struggle, and which now exacted strikes against Turkish Cypriots, was the scarier enemy. But he also acknowledged that the belligerent events of 1974 had changed his life. However, he also stated that many use these tragic events to their own devices, oftentimes creating (ideological) barriers to innovation and social progress in society. He exemplifies this attitude when he tells the story of his return to Cyprus in the 1980s working for CNN World Report. At one point, he wanted to cover another item, the breaking AIDS crisis. However, he was asked,

'Why do you want to cover this? We have the Cyprus problem which needs solving first!'

When responding to the last interview question about changes taking place in Cyprus for some kind of re-unification of the two halves, George can be seen and heard letting out a long and deep sigh, which might be interpreted in two ways: a) as a sign of resignation, or b), a sign that not everything is lost, but that in Cyprus, things take longer than in other parts of the world.

2.3. The Second Interview: Ali

Ali, an amicable Turkish Cypriot in his early 70s, is a shop owner in the beautifully restored Büyük Han Market in the Turkish northern part of Nicosia. He has had many professions in his life – he worked as a carpenter and in construction, is a collector ofbooks and stamps and he is a sportsman. After his retirement, he opened a second-hand book and curiosity store in the aforementioned Büyük Han. He is active in the communityand whenever one walks by his shop, one can see many people inside it enjoying his hospitality.

It is clear from the start that, just like George, Ali is also comfortable in front of the camera. He jokes and laughs a lot and is clearly enjoying himself. He proudly mentions that he has been interviewed by foreigners many times over and relishes the memories and this present interview.

Very early on in the interview, Ali comments on the fact that he is fluent in English, Turkish and Greek and thus speaks all three of the island's languages. This allows him to position himself as an expert not just on his own Turkish Cypriot ethnic background, but also as an interlocutor for the two other official languages of the island. He grew up in Limassol but moved to Istanbul when he was 19 and then toKyrenia (Greek: Κερύνεια, Turkish: Girne) and Nicosia after his retirement. His father and mother had remained in Limassol and then 'moved' to Kyrenia. This was directly after the 1974 war and their move was an enforced patriation (from what had become Greek-Cypriot 'territory' to Turkish-Cypriot 'territory'). It is not surprising Ali uses the hyperbolic and safe word 'moved', rather than 'flee' or something similar, as this is one of his ways of coping with the difficult political situation in Cyprus, then and now. He is also keen to stress that he had good relations with the Greek community. 'If I want to buy something [at a house/shop], I was invited to the house.' This in his eyes was a sign of inclusion in the Greek community.

Apart from being a gifted narrator and performer, Ali is also a master of evasion. Asked whether he sees the 'old days' of both communities living together peacefully returning again, he replies: 'This is a political question. I keep away from that. ... I am a very good mathematician and am also good at hunting.' A while later he comes back to the subject, though: 'We pay politicians to do things for us. That's it. We do not need to be involved. A normal life is better.' This statement speaks very clearly to his politics, at least when talking to us. He stays away from them, even implying that politics are 'un-normal.' He also stresses the use of the word 'happy' when referring to himself, which appears time and again. And, lastly, he stresses that 'if you have so many problems in the past, you work on your body.' Besides that, according to his statements, you also withdraw further into your private matters. He is proud of his body and mentions that he has been a runner and still goes walking in Troodos, the

highest mountain range and spanning both parts of Cyprus. This last element is again a hint that he does not see Cyprus as a divided entity.

2.4. Analysis of the interviews

When analysing the interviews, it becomes clear that all three individuals interviewed seemed to enjoy the telling of their stories. They are experienced narrators and have many elements of their stories readily available. They view their speaking as empowerment and also as a bridge between their professional and private selves.

Significantly, both stress that the old days were better, a sentiment shared by the majority of the people interviewed. This age group still remembers the 'old days' and they are aware of the fact that a common, shared life had been possible for both communities before, whereas this is not the case for the younger generation.

Retelling traumatic events has different implications for different informers: some individuals might go quiet, whereas others use the interview to cathartic effect in that pain is extra-territorialised (Dawson, 1999). In our sample the respondents acted in very different ways: George told a story about his fear of hearing airplanes which is due to his experiences in the 1974 war, whereas Ali refused to recall any traumatic experiences. In George's case, this retelling might have a cathartic effect to help overcome any trauma by cladding the experience into a stock narrative and thus making it a manageable part of oneself's history. In Ali's case, any trauma associated with the events was downplayed and evaded, which is another, but perhaps not the healthiest, way of managing it.

For both interviewees, one might apply the theory of compartmentalisation of events into different modes. Portelli (1997: 24-27) stipulates that oral history narratives generally adopt three different modes: the institutional, the communal and the personal. In oral history narratives, each one of these is characterised by the usage of a different personal pronoun: the third person singular for the institutional, the first person plural 'we' for the communal and the first person singular 'I' for the personal. In our sample, all three modes appear, although the personal memory dominates in two accounts, suggesting that agency is at a prime for both these interviewees, but an agency which is mostly reduced to personal and less to institutionalised interactions.

Both respondents were content with being interviewed at their respective places of work, George in his office, Ali in his shop and George in his office. George was able to tell a story right away, perhaps also because the airplane story was one he had recounted numerous times. Ali had so many stories that it was hard for him to concentrate on any one in particular. It is remarkable that all three of them were not keen to speak directly about politics, with George being more open than Ali. George stressed the fact that he did not leave Cyprus permanently, because for him it was worth fighting for a solution on the island itself and thus stay true to his roots. Ali did not explain why he moved back to Cyprus following his retirement, but his life on the island is ample proof that he considers it his home. However, Ali refrains from speaking about politics and sees his own body rather than the country of his residence as a construction site. In all three cases, the interviews revealed how much the Cyprus problem has intervened in their lives and altered their life choices and attitudes. All three of them made their choices accordingly: George came back to Cyprus and entered the media field to perhaps affect some changes in the thinking of the

population in the south; Ali came back restricting himself to his own body and the book and tourism trade.

It is fair to say that without the events of 1974, their lives would have moved on different tracks but they have found coping mechanisms and coherence systems to deal with the ensuing changes: George in a more professional capacity, Ali in a more private one. In all three, composure appears to have been achieved through the retelling of their stories, be it politically, apolitically or artistically.

2.4. Conclusions from the Cyprus study
The series of interviews undertaken aimed at providing an up-to-date snapshot of Cypriots and the interviewees' views on the past and its relevance for the present. From the two interviews discussed above, it became clear that all three individuals were and still are affected by the events of the 1960s and 1970s and that while individual composure has been achieved, closure on the other hand, individually, communally or bi-communally, has not. The remaining interviews speak to the same fact: all respondents agree that the status quo is untenable (unless one, like Ali, uses most of one's intellectual defences to expunge politics) and in need of change. The interviewers became better able to appreciate the fraught process of reconciliation when they were introduced to individualised life stories (Linde 1983; Frank 1995), not only from their own community but from the 'others' as well, thus creating a different perspective from the official records on both sides.

The interviews conducted during this project made it clear that much of the Cypriot memory and identity research work is still going on. All respondents were trying to make sense of their own identity vis-a-vis the general political situation in returning to individualised events in their pasts. As there are other ongoing projects scattered across the island, OH has of recent times, become an important tool in working through memories and collecting them. The next task will be to provide a more centralised way of accessing all these diverse interviews and thus making it easier for future researchers to access this much needed material. It is important to involve the next generations, as they will become the guardians of this knowledge and should be given as many narrations as possible to evaluate. Due to the technology available today, especially video equipment and easy storage facilities, this job is becoming easier as time goes by. Yet, more training, motivational discourse and institutional support are all still required in order to get projects such as the current ones off the ground, a task the EU, UN and national governmental and non-governmental institutions all need to work on together in order to provide the grounds for success.

3. Malaysia - Indonesia
Disclaimer: What follows are first heuristic steps into this project, which is still ongoing at the point of this writing.

The border between Malaysia and Indonesia in Borneo dates back to the time of the colonial conquests. It was here where Britain and Holland demarked their areas of influence. Borneo, together with Malaysia and Indonesia gained its independence from the colonial powers in the early second half of the 20th century, the border remains to this day and the voices of the border dwellers are routinely drowned out by political wrangling over the border. While Cyprus and Borneo might be described as

'cold borders', as there rarely are any incidents, they still inform people's life on a daily basis. The project set out to pave the way for collecting interviews from border dwellers.

In order to facilitate the project, in January and February 2014, workshops on oral history were conducted in Pontianak, West Kalimantan and in Kuching, Sarawak. In these workshops, participants were trained in questionnaire design, interviewee selection, interviewing techniques, camera work and post- production skills. A refresher will be held in January 2015 with the actual project undertaken in February 2015.

In order to validate the preliminary questionnaires, 4 sample interviews were conducted and which are transcribed in the Appendix. From the interviews, it became that, just as in Cyprus, people do not officially reflect on the border much, but that it rather insinuates itself into their daily lives in a creeping way ('Seeing logo of Republic of Indonesia'). People display little concern for the political issues of the border and focus on practicalities ('I bought Baju Kebaya and hat and others buy imitated bags, clothes etc.'; 'More advanced, cleaner, more organised'). And just like in Cyprus, people longed for a normalisation of border issues in order to facilitate their lives and for less political interference. It is expect that the full set of interviews will provide a more differentiated picture, but the overall tendencies, easier dealings with th other side and less politicising of the issues – would remain similar for both projects.

4. Conclusion
The results from the two projects are giving a diversified picture of border life, in Cyprus as well as in Borneo. People are intently aware of border issues, but their idea of resolution is clearly settled in the practicalities of the here and now. Perhaps a little less so in Cyprus, where the memories of both sides living together in mostly peaceful ways are still fresh, and an overall solution, either as a federation or as two separate states, is still sought after. In Borneo, views are somewhat less politicised and focus more on practical matters of daily life.

The projects also express the hope that these interviews will contribute to individuals' empowerment and their better understanding of the historic processes which shaped and are continuing to shape their lives and their ethics in sharing an island. But both projects agree on two things: 1. the border poses a problem and a challenge that require a continuous struggle in order to minimise its impact; and 2. Politics are unhelpful in achieving a solution to 1.
Notes

1. More information on the project and a sample of the interviews can be accessed at www.sharpnetwork.eu.
2. Alev Adil, performing on 5 March 2012 at ARTos Foundation, Nicosia.
3. As an example, consider Landolf Scherzer's 2005 *Der Grenzgänger* (The Border Rambler). In hisreportage, the author wanders the length of the stretch of land that until 1989 used to be the German-German border. Through his low-key and conversational narrative, he is able to understand and portray people living along this once impenetrable border. And re readily acknowledges that the willingness of his respondents was mostly due to the fact that they felt he was one of them.

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APPENDIX I
Borderlands Project
Sample questions (generated by the Workshop Group, Kuching, Feb. 2014)
Written responses 1-3

Questions	Answers
What are your earliest memories of the border?	Seeing logo of Republic of Indonesia, Garuda Immigration building during my trip to Pontianak by bus via Tebedu Not much: I never feel Serikin as the border
What did your parents/older people tell you about the border?	Small stalls and cheaper price sold by Indonesian people Hygiene Warned me to beware of strangers, take care of won belonging and not to bring along many valuable things.
Have you ever crossed the border and if yes, for what purpose? Where and how do you usually cross the border?	Yes, to buy things, e.g. cloth/clothes at Tebedu by car. Yes, by bus on vacation Yes, to Pontianak by bus for a visit
Does the border have an impact on your life? If yes, how?	No Yes, new experience and eye opening No
Do you have relatives across the border? Do any of your friends/neighbours have?	Yes. Friends. No No. However, my friend have some relatives
How do you get your information about what is going on on the other side of the border?	From village people nearby Just following a tour guide organized by my in-law From the newspaper
How do you feel when you are on the other side? Have you had problems on the other side? Do you know of people who have had problems?	The language is different a little bit and also money exchange Yes, my wife: Hygiene (WC) language, living standards Normal except for the language difference
If people cross the border, what are they likely to purchase? How safe is cross-border trade?	To buy clothes, household. Safe enough Cheaper local products; imitated products; pretty safe I bought Baju Kebaya and hat and others buy imitated bags, clothes etc.: safe
Do you own property across the border?	No No No
Can you imagine a relationship with somebody across the border?	No Yes, not going to be easy and successful No
The idea of a borderless world vs. - nationalism - can they coexist peacefully?	No idea Cannot cannot
How do you hope the border will look like in 20-year time?	No idea; More controlled; More advanced, cleaner, more organised

APPENIDX II
Borderlands Project PONTIANAK - INDONESIA
Sample questions
Written interview 1

What are your earliest memories of the border?
I am not sure if I have earliest memories of the border. As my life is mostly far away
from the border, I also did not have too much interest in it before. I only got close to
the border when I and some friends conducted the border blogger movement program
in the middle of 2011. That program was established to empower the border people to
sharpen their awareness about their life by sharing their life story through web blogs.

What did your parents/older people tell you about the border?
From my source of information, there were no borders between Indonesia-Kalimantan
and Sarawak-Malaysia a long time ago. There was only one people, a sub-ethnicity of
the Dayak, living in both in Kalimantan and Sarawak. But after that, the line across
the country made them separate.

**Have you ever crossed the border and if yes, for what purpose? Where and how
do you usually cross the border?**
Yes. Some friends and I crossed the border to meet our Malaysian friend and we spent
our relaxed time in a small restaurant in the Sarawak area, near the border. We
crossed the border in Entikong in the Sanggau district, one of the formal borders
between Kalimantan and Sarawak Malaysia.

Does the border have an impact on your life? Which?
Yes. I recently became more interested in borderland life. It's so unique, challenging,
and beautiful. Many different ways of life can be find on the border. Also, we hear
from its people about how they understand the "nation" concept. People who live on
the border are more reachable by the Malaysian services instead of their own
country's. For examples: Indonesians who life across the border have it easier to
consume many Malaysian products, such as foods, but also services such as hospitals,
education, radio and television. It is caused by the long distance of their village from
the capital city of their district, province, even country.

**Do you have relatives across the border? Do any of your friends/neighbours
have?**
Yes, I have some friends who live on the border.

**How do you get your information about what is going on on the other side of the
border?**
I get the information from many media: internet, mobile phone connection, and
sometimes I get it directly from person-to-person talks.

**How do you feel when you are on the other side? Have you had problems on the
other side? Do you know of people who have had problems?**
If I were living on the border, that would be so challenging! Maybe I will see a new
life that I never imagined before! Many people I asked always told me about their
problems. Especially difficult to access government services such as health,
educational, infrastructures, etc. services.

If people cross the border, what are they likely to purchase? How safe is cross-border trade?
Which border that you mean? There are formal and informal borders between Kalimantan-Indonesia and Sarawak-Malaysia. People become easier to establish the trade in the formal border, but they have to be more careful if trading via the non-formal border, that is illegal but they are looking for a better life!

Do you own property across the border?
No, I don't.

Can you imagine a relationship with somebody across the border?
Yes. I have some friends on the border. No problems with the relation, we can build our communication via the cellular phone and internet.

The idea of a borderless world vs. - nationalism - can they coexist peacefully?
Yes, if the government always tries to empower the people there. But if the government never gives it attention, nationalism is only a joke!

How do you hope the border will look like in 20 years time?
Become a modern border!