**Ḥajj oral history project**

**What is Oral History?**

Oral history is the recording and preservation of historical information based on the personal experiences and opinions of the speaker. While it is an invaluable way of preserving the knowledge and understanding of older people, it can also involve interviewing younger generations.

**Why am I doing this?**

* Since the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him, the Ḥajj experience has continued to change year on year. Some of our grandparents and elders who went on the Ḥajj would have seen a very different Makkah and Madinah to the one we know today. They would have had a very different journey to the kind of journey we are used to today.
* By interviewing our elders we not only **learn** about their experiences, we also **preserve** them so they are remembered in history.
* For the same reason, we can also interview our parents and younger people to find out about their experiences on the Ḥajj.

**Before planning your project ask yourself the following questions:**

* Why am I doing this? What will the end result be? How many people should be involved?
* What sort of resources are available? Who should I interview? You will also have to gain access to some recording equipment and learn how to use it.
* Estimate the amount of people you will interview. Take into account the time you will spend planning, conducting, and writing up each interview.

**How do I conduct an oral history interview?**

**Before the interview**

* Talk to your interviewee briefly about the subjects you want to cover, arrange where and when your interview will be. You can also decide how much time is available to you both.
* Should you do any research before the interview? You should certainly know something about the subject you are going to talk about.

**The interview**

* Have you got everything? Recording equipment, a list of questions and some notes
* First impressions are important. If you are presentable and polite it will make a big difference to the proceedings. Chat before the interview but try to avoid the interviewee telling you any anecdotes that would be better told during the recording.

**Starting the interview**

* Check your interviewing environment – is there a potential for sounds that will interfere with your recording? If possible, try and choose a quiet environment. Always test sound levels – this may alert you to any failing batteries or poor connections.
* At the beginning of the interview you should record details of who you are talking to and when. If you subsequently lose all the paperwork the basic information should be on the tape/disc.

**Asking questions**

* A schedule or list of questions is a good idea at the start of a project although you may find you don’t need one as time goes by. Be careful not to stick to a list of questions too rigidly, let the conversation flow **naturally**.
* *Ask ‘open’ rather than ‘closed’ questions*. Easy to say but not always easy to do. An example of a closed question – a question which invites a yes/no answer – would be ‘You felt terrible didn’t you?’. An ‘open’ question would be ‘How did you feel?’ followed up with, ‘Why did you feel like that?’ if necessary.
* *Use plain words and avoid suggesting the answers:* ‘How did you feel about working as a housemaid?’ rather than ‘It must have been awful having to be a servant’, and ‘Can you describe your childhood?’ rather than, ‘I suppose your childhood was poor and unhappy?’
* *Maintain eye-contact.* This shows you are interested and enables you to encourage your interviewee with visual cues rather than speaking over the recording.
* *Clarify odd words* or things you are not sure about – phrases like ‘cutting the vamp’ (the boot and shoe trade). If you don’t ask at the time you may never know!
* *Don’t be afraid to ask*, but don’t interrupt or butt in. Make a mental or physical note to ask later. Particularly with older people, leave a pause at the end of their sentences as they may not have finished speaking.
* *Respect people’s opinions* even if you don’t agree with them. This is not the time for you to debate your political or cultural opinions with someone.
* *Be aware of tiredness* – not just the exhausted 96 year old you have been grilling for three hours, but your own tiredness as well. Take a break or come back another day.
* Ask who, what, where, when, why, and how. *People’s memories are not perfect*. It’s easy to confuse events and dates, people and places. If what you are told doesn’t seem to make sense you should try to clarify it. As an interviewer you should be critical, but not confrontational. *Most importantly you should listen to what you are being told.*

**After the Interview**

* If possible, it is polite to have a chat after the interview. You can explain what is going to happen to the interview, and say what the plans for your project are.
* Write up a summary or a transcript of the interview. Think about storing the material you have collected and *make a copy* of it. You could also write a letter of thanks to the interviewee and offer them a copy of the interview.
* Above all, listen to the interviews you do with a critical ear and keep interviewing!