Sustainability of Oral History: A Case of SRK Pulo at Kampung Semarang

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Abstract. History is data regarding historical instances of human activity. This study anticipates the cultural memory around the primary school, SRK Pulo, which was relocated while retaining its previous name. One of the ancient Malay settlements along the Sarawak riverbank in Kuching is called Kampung Pulo. Questions are being asked about the SRK Pulo, its origin and other related histories to acknowledge. Further study, especially oral history inquiries, might help clear up any lingering questions regarding a historical truth or knowledge gap. For the benefit of future research, the cultural memory of intangible cultures needs to be preserved and documented through oral history research. To highlight historical local stories as the major focus in a qualitative manner, this study utilised Husserlism in Transcendental Phenomenology (TPh). The positive takeaways from oral history investigations into the genesis of SRK Pulo could serve as a guideline for the younger generation to respect and learn from the past to establish evocative living in the future. The sustainability of indigenous peoples in preserving their sociocultural ways of life and oral traditions depends on this study.

Keywords and phrases: indigenous knowledge, intangible culture, ethnicity, indigenous sustainability, transcendental phenomenology

Introduction

History is understood as the origin of a lineage and/or the confirmation of an event that happened in the past. History is important as an explanation of something happening in the present. History becomes the starting point for the development and expansion of something, moving forward to improve it. According to Nadzan (1979), written history begins with oral sources, not written or recorded

spontaneously. Apparently, there is doubt about historical facts that require further confirmation, especially through oral history. For example, the *Memali* incident that occurred in 1985 in Malaysia was recorded as a monumental act of unjustifiable cruelty. However, a study (cf. Rahilah and Siti Fathihah 2012) reveals the differences in stories that exist from different points of view about the *Memali* tragedy. Therefore, oral history is anticipated to be an alternative to written historical sources that are considered incomplete (Fogerty 1983; Siti Roudhah et al. 2012). Furthermore, oral history could strengthen and deepen the understanding of certain written histories and it has its own strengths.

Specifically, the denotation of oral history is defined as a description of history that should be in oral form and collected to be a written record of history (Nadzan 1979; Rahilah and Siti Fathihah 2012). The evidence of oral history was collected and found to be correlated to existing written records, history, or things that are considered interesting to disclose. For instance, there are cultural artefacts exhibited in the museum; however, nobody knows the primary ideas, related rituals, methods, or stories behind those artefacts. Therefore, oral history is imperative to provide further justification, emphasise the impact of the events, and/or complete an existing record of written history. Furthermore, the collection of information attained through oral history from various sources in the community can generate a new perspective and/or division of knowledge. Oral history contributes to the body of knowledge and requires efforts to strengthen and promote the source of information in a well-thought-out manner (Nadzan 1979; Hanis and Denison 2022; Siti Roudhah et al. 2012). Efforts to collect information may start with side conversations or social conversations among the local community, which are useful as a reference source, especially in historical research in the future.

Oral history is formally obtained through recording interviews with individuals who have important stories to tell, either with characters who sketch the history themselves (Irwanto 2012; Siti Roudhah et al. 2012) or witnesses to certain historical events (Darban 1997). A social conversation may lead to a compilation of local history (stories or experiences) that concern the past to establish a written history or record. Predominantly, oral history is a major contributor to the science of historiography (Irwanto 2012; Rahilah and Siti Fathihah 2012), which involves the study of history and its methods. The construction of historiographic knowledge includes three branches of acquaintance, including oral tradition, oral history and local history (Irwanto 2012). These three terms are used interchangeably in oral history writing. Specifically, oral tradition refers to the method of obtaining information or facts through interviews (oral inquiry). Second, oral history is a historical statement obtained orally (Irwanto 2012), in which a legendary story is interpreted from the experience of someone who has had an experience about

an event. On the other hand, local history includes the confirmation of something or an event that has happened in a place, which is closely related to oral history. The interpretation of facts, written information and oral evidence is important empirically because of the accuracy, reliability and validity challenges that exist, especially from the source of information obtained due to sociocultural factors, demographics, geography and other differences in interests. The inability to understand cultural variations (Awang 2018) causes psychological, physical and behavioural difficulties, causing interpretation misunderstandings, especially in diverse sociocultural societies (Awang and Anees 2014). Thus, the researcher (cf. Rahilah and Siti Fathihah 2012) affirms that the writing of history, especially related to important past events, needs to be expressed based on the existence of differing views based on the details of the information sources and evidence attained.

Scholars (cf. Fogerty 1983; Kipping, Wadhwani and Bucheli 2014; Sommer and Quinlan 2018) emphasise that historical manuscripts contain documentation about phases of life, especially involving events that have significance for the development of the country. Although the oral history obtained is strongly dependent on the viability of the individual's memory, other factors, such as health, background and certain pressures, are also taken into consideration in the information attained. However, an event that has an impact on the psychological, physical and behavioural well-being of a person puts credit on the information or verbal testimony that contributes to important facts about the event. Thus, oral history research methods need to be further emphasised in the publication of historical research materials (Kipping, Wadhwani and Bucheli 2014). Oral history, which is alleged to be the main source of historical writing, highlights the information obtained during the interview session about the perpetrator's (the research participants) experiences and/or events witnessed in the past. Communal understanding of local history begins with oral history, where the perpetrators, writers and readers of oral history should have an appropriate perspective on indigenous culture. Basically, the perspective of cultural origins in oral history refers to evidence involving an individual or a community group in a sociocultural environment.

The loss of historical facts, known as cultural diaspora, is widely discussed by scholars (such as Clifford 1994; Cohen 2002; Hall 1990; Safran 1991) for its impact on various fields, especially in the social sciences. The cultural diaspora occurred once the knowledge, stories, or experiences of the original inhabitants were added to or completely diminished. The cultural diaspora is, in fact, very detrimental to future generations without a complete or significant source to explain an event, the origin of a lineage, or an interesting moment that has happened in an

area or community group (Clifford 1994; Cohen 2002; Hall 1990; Safran 1991). Thus, local history that is not properly documented becomes folklore or fiction that describes imaginary stories, events, or people and causes the knowledge of ancestors to be diverted far from the truth. Folklore is a social phenomenon that might have truly happened in the past. However, a folktale or a legendary story by the aboriginals is possibly fiction created based on their phenomenology, observation, or symbolism, which requires oral history for validation. Foremost, folklore and folktales are both devised as beneficial thoughts, motivations and lessons, as well as a hidden code of conduct or social secret crafted behind the story (Arslan 2018; Hanis and Denison 2022; Schütz 1944). Independent living in the past used those folklores and folktales as content for entertainment or a guide for social relationship development to acquire significant knowledge, practices, skills and lifestyles.

Some of the oral traditions knowledge or stories are treated as sacred and orally inherited by a selected person in a particular village, whereas written documentation is considered taboo (Awang, Amelia and Susana 2023). Moreover, modernisation and simplicity in today's lives contribute continuously to the diminishing of intangible culture, especially among the millennial generation. Likely, there is a protocol known as "event inviter" (known in the local Sarawak Malay dialect as *tukang seruk*). The event inviter will verbally send the invitation door-to-door to invite villagers a few days prior to scheduled events. There is a gender, clothing and speech protocol for event inviter. This event inviter currently seems irrelevant, especially among millennials, due to the current information and communication technology (WhatsApp, Telegram, etc.). Additionally, diminishing cultural memory about other folk tales, experiences and events that happened in the past, especially among the original inhabitants of Kampung Pulo a while ago (such as *mbuang peraja* [throwing bad luck], *buah plajo* [wild nut] and *rebak anyut* [drift stump], *neruju* [prickly bush] shrub, tearing palm tree roof leaves, *makan kaleng* [tiffin meals], *ngaruk retih* [frying corn], *sedekah curi* [stealing alms], *khatamal Al-Quran* [completion of the Quranic recitation] and spiritual offering at *koteng* [sacred grave]), are those that by chance have been forgotten or abandoned, as well as event inviter.

Cultural sustainability (Awang, Amelia and Susana 2023; Awang et al. 2020; Awang, Rashidah and Aiza 2019; 2022) critically demands the conservation of cultural heritage (Roy 2015), which includes steps to extend the life of cultural heritage while maintaining the importance of the aesthetic value of heritage. Maintaining the aesthetics of cultural heritage and measures of cultural heritage conservation include retaining traditional monuments, materials, stories, or

other evidence symbolising a community identity, enduring traditional customs practices, or at least recognising the importance of cultural heritage documentation (Awang, Rashidah and Aiza 2019; 2022). Thus, oral history plays a significant role in documenting the local history of an event, skill, experience, or cultural memory. According to Hanis and Denison (2022), oral history provides a significant basis for local history in the recorded record.

Intangible cultural elements are a substance for the references (a lesson to learn) for today's society to evade unnecessary psychological misbehaviour (Arslan 2018) or influences, especially those that contradict local norms due to socio-ecocultural underestimation (Awang 2018). Therefore, oral history has supremacy over other methods of local history affirmation. Thomson (2007) discusses the critical development of oral history across four paradigm evolutions, including the resurgence of memory, the developmental phase, perception transformation and the digital revolution. These phases of paradigm shift contribute to the importance of oral history to the community in disseminating information, upholding the truth and providing clarification about the events that happened in the past. Additionally, the cross-disciplinary approach of science provides planetary promise for qualitative methods to scientifically interpret the oral history linkage between culture, history and memory.

In the meantime, the World Convention for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), aimed specifically at the conservation of intangible cultural heritage, held on 18th May 2001, has published a declaration for the oral and intangible cultural heritage of humanity (UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity) (UNESCO 2001). This declaration is vital to identifying an exclusive phenomenon to protect, including performances, music, folklore and ceremonies from around the world. Intangible cultural heritage is defined as "practices, representations, symbols, mimics, knowledge and skills, including tools, objects, artefacts and cultural environment spaces that are associated with communities, groups and in certain cases, individuals, that are recognised as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO 2001). Therefore, local sociocultural conservation efforts are imperative to maintain the intangible culture for future generations (Prott 1998), including the story about the establishment of SRK Pulo as highlighted in this study. Apparently, there are local and traditional identities that seem insignificant, uninhibited, or substituted by the passage of time. This situation creates a gap, void, or incompleteness in the existing sources of local history. Excavating reality and evidence and documenting aboriginal folklore and forgotten knowledge is essential for the future sustainability of local history before it disappears over time (Hanis and Denison 2022; Awang, Rashidah and Aiza 2019; 2022). Therefore, the

key objective of this study is to unravel the question about the origin of the primary school of Kampung Pulo (SRK Pulo), located in Sarawak, Malaysia. A doubt behind the names is the origin of the school and why it is named SRK Pulo instead of SRK Semarang (the current location of the school is in Kampung Semarang, not Kampung Pulo). The expected outcome of this study is to aid in sustaining and preserving the cultural memory and folklore kept by the community, especially associated with the centuries-old Malay village of Kampung Pulo along the Sarawak riverbank in Kuching. This initiative is imperative, taking into consideration the ongoing state's developmental project affecting the area and future of the related oral history.

Methodology

According to Kirby (2019), phenomenology is a research approach that assumes that humans have a natural attitude that is semi-scientific in analysing an event, the past, the experience and the inherited culture where it happened. This natural attitude provides a framework for interpreting the experiences inherited and their remembrance as cultural memories. Hence, this phenomenological writing aims to gain an understanding of oral history through past stories. This method is also described as an ethnography study, which is a scientific description of people and cultures with their customs, habits and mutual differences. However, this study highlighted doubts over the origin of the school currently located in the centuries-old Malay village of Kampung Semarang, but the school's name reflected another village (Kampung Pulo). Thus, phenomenological statements focus on individual experiences and related inherited oral history issues. In particular, the Husserlism of Transcendental Phenomenology (TPh) is a philosophical approach adapted in this study to qualitatively understand a person's experience (Moustakas 1994). The TPh approach is particularly focused on the meaning of a person's life experience connected to the investigated concept or phenomenon, emphasised as "the understanding of the concrete meaningful relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation is the main target of phenomenological knowledge" (Moustakas 1994,14). Furthermore, transcendental phenomenology involves the process of identifying an important and significant phenomenon that requires researchers to bracket the participants' experiences to match the objective of the investigation (Bliss 2016; Cresswell and Poth 2018). Basically, this study anticipates the understanding of a phenomenon that happened in the past among the observed society. The verdicts of this phenomenological investigation need oral history preservation for future reference.

The transcendental phenomenology embodied in this study is defined as "to experience a comprehensive description that provides a basis for reflective structural analysis in order to describe the essence of experience" (Moustakas 1994, 13). The data obtained in this study consisted primarily of a critical and in-depth interview. The unstructured interviews were conducted using a non-formalised interview schedule where an in-depth conversation was developed from casual encounters with individuals (Burgess 1995). This study focuses attentively on the saturation of knowledge (Bertaux 1981, 37) and the feasibility of sampling (participation) in qualitative research interviews (Seidman 2006). Precisely, this study is designed as a basis for exploring issues of conformation and finding relevant evidence in the preservation of local history, especially the establishment origin of SRK Pulo. Likewise, Kirby (2019) suggests the phenomenological approach is applied to acknowledge oral history, where the scientific interviews establish the social relationship between researchers and interviewees. This social relationship is an effective tactic for unravelling hidden issues, widening the horizon of the discussion and filling the information gap (detecting any omissions and/or errors of fact in other published written documents).

Two unstructured, in-depth interviews were conducted with the perpetrator, who witnessed the origin of the SRK Pulo establishment, in accordance with the four phases of the paradigm evolution (Thomson 2007). The recorded (with consent) interviews were conducted with natives of Kampung Pulo, Mrs. Hjh. Hanapiah binti Hj. Ediwi (Cikgu Yop) and Miss Hjh. Kalimah@Salbiah binti Hj. Ediwi (Ustazah Salbiah), on 7th August 2020 and 24th February 2022 in Mrs. Hjh. Hanapiah's residence at Taman Sukma, Kuching, Sarawak. Mrs. Hjh. Hanapiah is an alumnus of Sekolah Rakyat Kampung Pulo (the public school of Kampung Pulo, SRK Pulo) (1958–1963); she entered first grade (Primary One) when she was eight years old. The selection of participants is based on the credibility of information sources and evidence of local history. The credibility of the source of information was established where the participants were reflected as "insiders" (Schütz 1944; Wilson 2002), "characters" (Irwanto 2012; Siti Roudhah et al. 2012) and "witnesses" (Darban 1997), as well as authoritative, to achieve the objective of this study. Furthermore, the insider information is considered valid (at least partially), referring to the knowledge and experience of insiders in the context of the situation being discussed (Wilson 2002). First and foremost, ethical concerns for the oral history interviews were obtained from the participants. Ethical concerns were also acquired from some of the villagers (especially the elderly and chief of the village) of Kampung Pulo in the process of data validation based on the information obtained from the main participants. The unstructured interview questions included: Who was the originator of the idea to build SRK Pulo? Where is the original location of SRK Pulo? Who built SRK Pulo? When was SRK Pulo first built? Who are the teachers who teach at SRK Pulo?

The facts, information and arguments transcribed and narrated from the interviews are strengthened and supported by existing evidence and/or other affidavits presented by the participants, especially old photographs kept in their personal or family collection. Although the cultural memory method is exposed to the contextualisation of representation issues (Kansteiner 2002; Confino 1997), this study perceives that this method provides significant inclusivity in the information obtained. Methodologically, the cultural memory narration is recorded, transcribed, illustrated and contextualised to identify possible levels of indexing codes related to emerging themes and patterns of obtained information. The established codes are reviewed to identify any single occurrences or repeated data patterns. According to Polkinghorne (2005), the narrative, or any form of oral story, is exclusively obtained data that stands as a novel description of a past event or individual's experience, rich in living evidence and motivational values. The main interview data obtained are vital to unravelling the issue of the establishment of SRK Pulo, as highlighted in this study for future generational reference. Therefore, the narration of cultural memory in this study is justified and credible considering the insufficiency of existing related references to the exceptional sociocultural appearances of the observed phenomenon.

Data validation and interrater reliability checks were conducted to assess the external consistency of the main interview data. The validation and reliability checks were conducted after the data interpretation and writing up the findings. Henceforth, several follow-up interviews were conducted with both participants to provide further clarification of some of the points obtained in the main interview. The consistency of the data is attained when the repetition of interview sessions has produced saturation and consistency of information. Furthermore, several individuals (elderly and those involved in and/or witnessing the establishment of SRK Pulo) were consulted between 24th February 2022 and 31st May 2022 to validate the realism of the data transcripts. Supplementary interviews are considered validation interviews to cross-check and confirm the facts narrated in the series of interviews conducted with the participants. The validation interview is conducted vigorously to obtain their approval and establish the validity and credibility of the study. This verification process is considered acceptable and sufficient for verifying the interview data. According to Beck, Keddy and Cohen (1994), cross-paradigmatic communication contributes to interpretation difficulties, but the value of truth, applicability, consistency and neutrality may offer researchers and phenomenologists an appropriate alternative to logical positivist terminology. Therefore, the depiction findings on the establishment of SRK Pulo articulated in this study are possibly well represented and sufficiently justifiable for their methodological validity (Winter 2000) and credibility (Patton 1999). The following section illustrates the encryption of the narration about the SRK Pulo establishment.

Results and Discussion

The centuries-old Malay villages, especially on the west side of Kuching city, have been traditionally recorded in the history of Sarawak since 1841, in the era when the Brooke family governed the state. These traditional Malay villages are foreseen as part of an urban area in the old city of Kuching. On the northern side, similar to other traditional villages along the Sarawak riverbank in Kuching city, Kuching is facing the evolution of civilisation in line with current socioeconomic and political developments. This northern side of Kuching city villages was considered a suburban residential area in the past. In the folds of history, a part of the villages on the northern side across the Kuching city centre are known as Seberang Hilir villages, as depicted in a part of the lyrics of Sarawak's folk song, "Oh! Pak Tambang". In fact, there are eight traditional inhabitant villages within the Seberang Hilir villages, namely, Kampung Boyan, Kampung Gersik, Kampung Sorabaya, Kampung Panglima Seman (currently known as Kampung Panglima Seman Ulu), Kampung Buah (currently known as Kampung Panglima Seman Lama), Kampung Semarang, Kampung Bajong (currently known as Kampung Pulo Ulu) and Kampung Pulo (currently known as Kampung Pulo Hilir). In the past, the far end of the village rested on a tributary known as Sungai Seluang. In particular, the Sungai Seluang is a tributary that forms the border between Kampung Pulo Hilir and Kampung Bintawa Ulu today. The Sungai Seluang used to be a hideout among villagers during the Japanese army attack (during the Japanese invasion of Sarawak in 1941 to 1945). Currently, there is a newfangled village (next to Kampung Pulo Hilir) known as Kampung Bintawa (home to several other villages, namely, Kampung Bintawa Ulu, Kampung Bintawa Tengah and Kampung Bintawa Hilir). Figure 1 portrays the atmosphere in Kampung Pulo in the 1960s during a feast organised by the villagers. Foremost, it is very important to appreciate the past for the sustainability of local history and future references.

Figure 1. The atmosphere in Kampung Pulo in the 1960s during a feast
(wedding reception)

Source: A personal family photo collection of Mr. Hj. Ediwi bin Yahya

Formerly, there was only one primary school available to accommodate the inhabitants of Kampung Seberang Hilir. It is known as Sekolah Rendah Kerajaan Kampung Gersik (Kampung Gersik government's primary school, SRK Gersik). The initial location of SRK Gersik is currently on the site of Surau Hidayatul Rahman, Kampung Gersik. The children who go to school and come far downstream (Kampung Pulo) must walk 2.5 km to 3.0 km for 30 minutes to 60 minutes (on an unpaved dirt road) to get to school (SRK Gersik). Apart from that, the increase in the number of pupils compared to the existing school's capacity demands the establishment of a new school. Sparingly, with the incremental awareness of the need for elementary education, especially among villagers and increases in population, an initiative was started to establish a newly fangled primary school, despite SRK Gersik.

The initiatives to build a primary school at Kampung Pulo have received support from villagers, who formed a special task force (the school management committee) to set up the school on a temporary site that was lent by some of the residents. As a result, a primary school was established in 1954, known as Sekolah Rakyat Kampung Pulo (SRK Pulo). Initially, a block of school buildings sheltered by a roof made from mangrove palm leaves (*nipah*) was built from scratch, mutually

assisted and prepared solely by the villagers. A mutual consensus among villagers stood out by joining hands to contribute their money, energy, property and other possessions needed for the school. In the meantime, the school management committee took a proactive initiative by inviting villagers from house to house, which benefits the school and encourages the children to attend school regardless of age. It is regulated by the Education Department that children attend their primary school from age seven years old (Grade 1) to 12 years old (Grade 6). However, there was a weakening of educational rules in the past, where there was no compulsion by age to attend school. According to Mrs. Hjh. Hanapiah:

> I went to SRK Pulo and started grade one when I was eight years old. Some of my classmates are older than me, at 10 years old. It is a requirement by the government that the schooling system start in grade one. The Education Department provides a school syllabus and curriculum where the education journey follows the study plan without placing grades based on age. However, for those who are 12 years old and above and are just about to start their primary one, there are illiterate and adult classes available elsewhere.

There are also some old photos shared where those mediocre photographs enhanced the oral history shared by the participants to prove that cultural memory is not rhetorical. Additionally, the photographs provide concrete evidence of the existence of the original SRK Pulo in its initial location and the atmosphere of the school in the 1960s. As shown in Figure 2, Mr. Abdul Rahman, a classroom teacher and some of the pupils snapped a memoir photograph in front of SRK Pulo. The original SRK Pulo was observed from the photographs and narrated by the participants that the school features an old woody school block with basic needs of tables and chairs without doors and/or windows, a mangrove leaf roof and a building that is not equipped with facilities found in today's school amenities. The physical condition of the school at that time led some to call the SRK Pulo a "goat pen school". Even though the physical appearance of the school is not attractive, the spirit among the villagers towards their awareness of the need for and importance of elementary education is reflected in the number of pupils who attended the school. In the photographs, school enthusiasm is displayed, whereas it is shown that most of the pupils wear school uniforms (although some of them do not wear school shoes due to the unpaved dirt of the school compound).

Figure 2. Mr. Abdul Rahman and pupils of SRK Pulo
Source: A personal family photo collection of Mr. Hj. Kamil bin Bujang; obtained through
Mrs. Norlidah binti Hj. Halmi (Chief of Kampung Pulo Hilir)

Similarly, Figure 3 also depicts a memoir of school pictures snapped for Mrs. Betty binti Mohd Tuah with pupils of SRK Pulo, with the school in the background. While Figure 2 shows the teacher's photographs with pupils from the lower grade, Figure 3 portrays the teacher snapping a memory with pupils from the higher grade. Foremost, both Figures 2 and 3 demonstrated the commitment paid by the school management committee and the teachers (assigned by the Education Department to the school) to strive to provide the widest possibilities and opportunities to every child in the village so as not to fall behind in the formal education stream. Mrs. Hjh. Hanapiah added that some of the memorable former teachers who teach at the SRK Pulo include Mr. Osman bin Ali (headmaster), Mr. Gobel (assistant headmaster), Mr. Abdul Rahman, Mr. Awang Ahmad bin Awang Lihie, Ms. Betty binti Mohd Tuah, Mr. Halik bin Simpo and Mr. Hj. Kamil bin Bujang, Mr. Linang, Mr. Robert Chew, Ms. Sara, Ms. Seriah binti Ali and Ms. Lim.

Figure 3. Mrs. Betty binti Mohd Tuah and pupils of SRK Pulo
Source: A personal family photo collection of Mr. Hj. Kamil bin Bujang; obtained through
Mrs. Norlidah binti Hj. Halmi (Chief of Kampung Pulo Hilir)

Primarily, the SRK Pulo was built to accommodate the influx of pupils, especially to support the inhabitants of Kampung Pulo, Kampung Bajong and Kampung Semarang while pupils who reside in Kampung Buah, Panglima Seman, Kampung Sorabaya, Kampung Gersik and Kampung Boyan are encouraged to attend their primary school in SRK Gersik. Captivatingly, there are no fees charged to go to school and the teachers even receive support from the Education Department for their placement and schoolbooks. Among the syllabi taught at the school are Science subjects (Nature Study), English, Malay, Mathematics and Islamic Religious Education. All the subjects (except Malay and Islamic religious education) are taught in English as the medium of instruction. The school hours range from seven in the morning to twelve in the afternoon, Monday through Friday. Apparently, there are no teaching and learning activities outside the classroom (curriculum), such as a uniformed club or students' association, except for sports (badminton and rounders [small ball athletics]). Mrs. Hjh. Hanapiah recalled the memories of her school days:

> I still remember Ms. Sara teaching us a Nature Study (Science) subject, Mr. Hj. Kamil and Mr. Linang teaching English, Mr. Robert teaching mathematics, Mr. Abdul Rahman teaching Malay and Mr. Gobel teaching religion. For English class, we are needed to bring a face mirror to school. The mirror is used to see our own face during the "radio lesson", which is a learning method about pronunciation.

Figure 4. Mr. Gobel standing on wooden blocks during a school assembly
Source: A personal family photo collection of Mr. Hj. Ediwi bin Yahya

Figure 4 portrays Mr. Gobel standing on the wooden blocks (classroom chairs) during a school assembly. To attract the attention of the crowd, Mr. Gobel raised himself by standing on the wooden blocks to deliver the speech and/or announcement during the school assembly since a public address system and/or loudspeaker equipment were not available in the school. In the past, the school assembly was held on the field in front of the school, where Mr. Gobel was caught wearing a rubber shoe due to the rickshaw ground of the school compound. Due to the unpaved dirt, it has forced some of the pupils to come to school barefoot. This condition proves the socioeconomic condition of the inhabitants, especially along Seberang Hilir villages at that time.

Meanwhile, the pupils and teachers are permitted to be involved in any extracurricular activities (uniforms, sports, and/or associations or social clubs). However, a formal extracurricular programme organised at the school is chaired and guided by a teacher. As stated earlier, the extracurricular activities conducted at SRK Pulo were limited to sports (badminton and rounders) activities only. Nevertheless, the school management committee and the teachers took their own initiative to involve the school with the public by participating in the celebrations that are held in the city, such as a parade that was held at Kuching city's central field of Padang Sentral (currently known as Padang Merdeka). Such initiatives are important to provide external exposure to children from villages.

Educational initiatives to sustain local learning institutions are becoming a continuous agenda item, especially among the school management committee. Although the initial establishment of the committee is to build the SRK Pulo, the following noble mission is to obtain a site to house the SRK Pulo permanently. As mentioned earlier, the school was standing temporarily on private property lent by the villagers. Finally, after 10 years of standing on a temporary school site in Kampung Pulo, the SRK Pulo is awarded by the government a permanent school site, which is located behind Kampung Semarang while retaining its initial established name of SRK Pulo. Initially, a single-story wooden block (a long house building pattern) was built for the SRK Pulo (in Kampung Semarang). In contrast to the "goat pen school", the newly built SRK Pulo at that time was proudly standing in an appropriate school building equipped with needed amenities (water and electricity supply, field, toilets) and other facilities (tables, chairs, public address systems). Figure 5 shows a memoir captured among the teachers, parents, pupils and guests during the opening ceremony of the newly opened SRK Pulo in Kampung Semarang.

Figure 5. A memory snapped during the opening ceremony of SRK Pulo (in Kampung Semarang); Caught in the picture Mr. Gobel marked with an arrow
Source: A personal family photo collection of Mr. Hj. Ediwi bin Yahya

Foremost, figure five proves the enthusiasm portrayed by the villagers towards the importance of elementary education for the future of their children. Socioeconomic conditions and standards of living in the past convinced society that the formal school certificate was perceived as a ticket to better job opportunities and hence changed the economic fate of the family. It is a remarkable flash for the SRK Pulo to have gained full recognition from the government, especially from the Education Department. The elevation of the school's status from a public-aid school into a fully government-aid school is applauded. Hence, the name of the school is changed from Sekolah Rakyat Kampung Pulo (the public school of Kampung Pulo) to Sekolah Rendah Kerajaan Kampung Pulo (the government's primary school of Kampung Pulo), nonetheless with the same abbreviations as SRK Pulo. Referring to a circular dated 2nd January 1997, issued by the Director General of Education Malaysia, Ministry of Education Malaysia Number 1/1997 regarding policies and regulations regarding school names stipulates that the use of the name "government schools" is replaced by "national schools". Therefore, SRK Pulo is now known as Sekolah Kebangsaan Pulo (SK Pulo), equipped with the latest educational facilities in modern multistorey concrete buildings. In closing, Mrs. Hjh. Hanapiah affirmed:

> The written record about SRK Pulo needs to be immortalised, although it is considered an unimportant event in developmental streams in this country. A written record such as this should exist before the "disappearance" of sources of written or inherited stories about the

existence of the village. A written record is essential before this village and our memories will be forgettable and/or replaced by a new settlement project known as "Darul Hana" in the next 20 years.

Foremost, the old photograph is a form of factual evidence and the mode of recalling memories especially contains a moment that someone experienced. The oral history recorded in this study has the power to explain the oral tradition with local history, especially related to the phenomenon that happened in Kampung Pulo in the past. This information is important to preserve significantly where most of those local practices in the past have diminished or become forgettable.

Discussion

The main objective of this study is to unravel the questionable origin of SRK Pulo, which is in Kampung Semarang. The name of the school does not reflect its current location. The oral history needs to unfold under the name of SRK Pulo instead of SRK Semarang. This study also aims to strengthen and prove the origin of SRK Pulo compared to other related published sources and/or written records. The documentation effort of oral history revolves in this study around the origin of SRK Pulo, narrated about the past for future references, as advocated by scholars (e.g., Roy 2015; Awang, Rashidah and Aiza 2019; 2022) in the conservation of cultural heritage. Converting the memory about local history acquired through oral history inquiry into written records has been highly rationalised, considering that the existing related records are incomplete. Foremost, written records are vital before the local history is diminished due to the emigration of the villagers (which affected almost all the villages in Seberang Hilir) and the ongoing urbanisation in the area.

The findings of this phenomenological study presented in this study assure that the data (information) narrated from the oral history inquiry (intense interviews) provide an empirical contribution to the historiography of the local history kept in the memory of villagers along the villages in Seberang Hilir, specifically in Kampung Pulo. According to scholars (cf. Irwanto 2012; Hanis and Denison 2022; Rahilah and Siti Fathihah 2012), oral history fills the void of other existing sources of local history. As an affirmation, the findings presented in this study can be summarised into two points of discussion, namely, the micro perspectives (individuals and groups) and the macro perspectives (state and country).

First, individual involvement in the community at the micro level demonstrates the ultimate effort and significant contribution towards the macro perspectives of sociocultural, political and economic formation. An awareness of the need for formal

education results in collective voluntary involvement in the establishment of SRK Pulo. Individuals' involvement in the community, especially along the villages in Seberang Hilir, proves their intact bond of brotherhood and respect. Unlikely, today's society is greatly influenced by the advancement of communication and information technology (ICT), where social media greatly affects an individual's daily life compared to the surrounding community. ICT is indeed positively beneficial in our daily lives today; it likewise has an excessive impact on mental health and socialisation, unlike in the past. Despite socioeconomic status and a limited choice of entertainment, social relations in the 1960s were fuelled by mass gatherings. The communal work to build the SRK Pulo is an example of how society members took the opportunity and perceived it as a point of time for gathering to express their societal concerns and contributions. Scholars (cf. Clifford 1994; Cohen 2002; Hall 1990; Safran 1991) contended that the cultural diaspora is avoidable once society plays a role, cherishes mutual social ties and defends communal norms and values.

Second, the findings demonstrated, from a macro perspective, the implications of the oral history of the establishment of the SRK Pulo. Undivided individual involvement in society portrays the untainted value of the village community in the past golden days. From a sociocultural point of view, despite living a simple lifestyle, society is concerned about the availability of necessities, specifically elementary education for their children, even though school facilities are inadequate and uncomfortable. The need for elementary education for their children flickered the hearts of some of the villagers in Kampung Pulo, who volunteered and collectively lent their property as a school site. This ancillary societal value teaches us that education is key to a future nation's development by improving the socioeconomic status of the family and local community. Erudition from indigenous Māori knowledge and perspectives on ecosystems (Harmsworth and Awatere 2013) proves that community inclusion extends the explanation of cultural value from cultural services towards the aspirational goals and desired indigenous outcomes of national building. For the economic lesson, the initiatives taken by the villages help the authorities manage their infrastructure planning to provide facilities according to what society truly needs and avoid wasting taxpayer money. From the perspective of the state administration, the establishment of SRK Pulo verifies that the education systems that started in the colonial era have grown to meet the needs of social development. Collectively, the establishment of SRK Pulo also responded to the national education policy stated through the Razak Statement in 1956, which was extended to the state of Sarawak, especially after the proclamation of the Malaysian Federation in 1963.

However, the findings of this study are limited to the memory of post-independence oral history and only focus on the sole explanatory objective of this study, primarily the establishment of SRK Pulo. A future study is summoned to extend the central discussion to other related issues, including student information records and systems, academic assessment and evaluation, school building maintenance, compensation to the landlord of the temporary school site (after the school moves to a permanent location) and other school governance issues. In addition, future studies are highly recommended to expand the horizon of oral history to cover other local histories within society's cultural ecosystem (Harmsworth and Awatere 2013), including religious and spiritual practices, community activities, cultural politics and other socioeconomic upbringings starting from the era before independence or the formation of the Malaysian Federation.

Foremost, a sociocultural formation among the inhabitants in the centuries-old Malay villages of Seberang Hilir gives the impression that a mutual social tie is key to survival kits to shape the future of the next generation. Compared to today's generation, which mostly shouts for support from the top, they expect the government to provide for all their needs and control the direction of the future. There is a Chinese saying, "授之以鱼如推之以游" (*shòu rén yǐ yú bù rú shòu rén yǐ yú*), which means "it is better to teach people to fish than to give them fish to eat. Fish can only save you in a momentary emergency. While teaching people to fish is beneficial for a lifetime". The conviction and earnestness demonstrated by the villagers are successfully gaining the government's attention by providing a permanent site for the SRK Pulo in Kampung Semarang. Accordingly, the oral history inquiry in this study represents an important lesson to preserve where society in the past successfully achieved an aspirational goal and desired indigenous outcomes by highlighting the need for primary education and mutual social collaboration. This aspirational goal and desired indigenous outcomes affect almost all social ecosystems (socioeconomic, political, religious and spiritual beliefs) in society. Oral history is not only subjected to affective elements (such as feelings and emotions) and behaviour but also records cognitive indications (knowledge, understanding and experience) from various perspectives of material culture, psychological life and spiritual life. Published history (records) is an opener for further knowledge exploration, not to relieve or arbitrate a history in an inadequate archive.

Conclusion

This study provides a significant affirmation that oral history is a scientific inquiry for knowledge enrichment and enlightenment in local history. Admitted the fact that not all events that happened in the past are treated as "historical" and/or comprehensively recorded and written in the history book. Oral history is a significant method for filling the gaps of incomplete historical information and providing evidence of references for further justification of the inherited local history. Hence, this study records memories narrated by native sources about the establishment of the SRK Pulo. In addition, the credibility of oral history is questionable due to the writer's biases, misunderstandings, or misinterpretations of the local history at the time the event is being written. Thus, intertextual comparison between existing written records and oral history inquiries is vital to identifying points of agreement with the established facts and proving the reliability of the local history. The reliability and validity of the local history, especially those associated with the sociocultural aspects of aboriginal people, are unravelled through the contribution of oral history investigations for further clarity and coherence of the information. To conclude, scholars, particularly within humanities studies, benefit from oral history awareness, as highlighted in this study. The establishment case of SRK Pulo is considered an isolated case of local history but a valuable lesson for future references, especially among the young generations of Seberang Hilir villagers.

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