

## ORAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS AT RESEARCH UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES IN MALAYSIA

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### Abstract

Oral history has usually meant as an account of historical event, person or place, a first person memory of the past, by an eyewitness. It is considered as living memories which have great importance in the history of mankind. It has also become a key resource for reconstructing, recreating and recording past and present knowledge of society. Academic libraries have served as repositories for books and manuscripts that help in revealing the stories of world's civilization for centuries. These civilizations have secured their history by training particular individuals to remember, to record and to pass the updated tradition on to the next generation orally. Sadly, much of our pasts, in terms of oral history, have not been preserved in academic libraries. Even though Malaysia was among the first country in Southeast Asia which have started oral history program in 1960s, activities on oral history conducted or collected by academic libraries in Malaysia appear to be vague. Over the years, various factors in library management have affected oral history activities and program and has brought it to a standstill. Therefore, in order to get a fresh insights on oral history activities within these institutions, this paper aims to study the current status of oral history collections in Malaysian research university libraries namely Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in terms of: availability, formats, types of physical treatment, topics covered, accessibility to users and researchers, usage of oral history and barriers in collecting and conducting oral history as resources for research and archives.

**KEYWORDS:** Libraries, Oral History, Universiti Sains Malaysia Library, Universiti Malaya Library, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Library, Universiti Putra Malaysia Library, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Library, Research University Libraries,

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Oral history recording is practised in varied institutional settings. In libraries and archives settings, oral history is not a new phenomenon. More than half of a century had passed where archivists and librarians debated on the theoretical and practical applications of oral history for archives and research libraries. Libraries had first utilized oral sources to fill in the gaps of historical records in the early 1950s and during the late 1960s, some articles in the library and archival literature proclaimed its documentary value. After founding the Oral History Association (OHA) in 1968, a library science professor Martha Jane K. Zachert published an article “The Implications of Oral History for Librarians” to underline the new responsibilities and opportunities facing librarians and the impact of oral history on libraries and archives in the coming decades.

In Malaysia, the realisation on the importance of oral history was not achieved overnight. Sarawak Museum was the earliest institution in the country to carry out oral history and started recording source materials in 1957. Among other institutions which had begun conducting and collecting oral history project include the National Archive of Malaysia, the National Museum, the Language and Literary Agency, the National Library, the various universities in the country, the mass media, as well as electronic media such as radio and television. Salleh Jafaruddin (1978) in the Colloquium on Oral History and the 4th General Conference of Sarbica at Universiti Sains Malaysia stated that the growth has been gradual, but sure. It gathered momentum as more and more institutions, government departments, organisations and private individuals delved into the subject. He also mentioned that initial works were done on ad-hoc basis and as such they invariably met with problems since projects plans had not been well laid out from the start. Thus, most of the institutions involved in oral history work started with their own objectives, carried out activities as they deemed fit and left off without making available for further research much of the data collected.

There are various definitions of oral history that can be found in literatures. National Committee on Oral History National Archive of Malaysia (1991) defines oral history as “the technique of eliciting the reminiscences of selected individuals through recorded interview sessions.” The Committee further elaborate, the individuals selected are those considered best able to provide such information as derive from their personal involvement and experience of historical events; from their special relationship with a particular personality; or the bearing

that a specific period in history may have had on their lives. The recorded interview, when transcribed, allows for the convenient use of Oral History as both research as well as teaching material. In this way, oral history can be made to contribute significantly to the existing sources on local history.

Rais Yatim (2005), in his opening speech during Seminar on Preservation and Dissemination of Oral History as National Heritage in Kuala Lumpur defined oral history as an activity, a detached and academic process of inquiry into the memories of people who have experienced the recent past directly. This inquiry and the responses it generates are recorded to supplement written records that have been found wanting in some measure for historical or aesthetic analysis. It is a studied abstract and analytic practice of historians and other social scientist, and it relies heavily on recording devices, whether manual, mechanical, or electronic.

Based from the above mentioned, the definition of oral history can be concluded as a methodology of collecting primary sources from a particular individual for the purpose of generating historical data for the reconstruction of the past. It can be employed by anybody in any fields, not merely by the archives or libraries, because oral history is simply the use of spoken testimonies as a source for history. It is not only preserving the memories of people who have played some important role in society but also encourages research and publication of their memoirs and aide researchers in collecting and using such materials.

What is the importance of Oral History? Oral history supplements the written record by interviewing people to obtain their recollections of events they themselves have experienced by providing new perspective on historical events because the interviews are conducted not only with prominent people but also with the great majority from all walks of life. This activity also encourages people to become aware of their own past, and can stimulate interest and research in local history. Oral History brings history into and out of the community and helps the less privileged and the old towards self dignity and self confidence. It makes for contact and understanding between social classes and between generations. With mutual meanings to both an individual and historians, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or time. Oral history offers challenge to the acknowledged myths of history, and means for an essential transformation of the social meaning of history.

Mohd Zaini Haji Baghul (1992) mentions that over the past decades oral documentation has become widely recognized as an indispensable means of recording and preserving

information related to experiences of the past. Historians as well as other academics from various fields have accepted the significance and usefulness of orally transmitted documentation of the past as source materials for research or other documentation purposes. With a particular function as a source of information - knowledge may not necessarily be in written form because it is well known that before knowledge is hatched into written form, the idea is secured in the brain of the teller or reencounter. Therefore, it is crucial to record reminiscences, experiences, testimonies, and reflections from individuals when they are still alive; otherwise the information would be lost to the future generation. Just like a proverb says 'when an old person dies, a library burns to the ground'.

## **2. BACKGROUND: ORAL HISTORY ACTIVITIES IN MALAYSIAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES**

Research Universities or RU are public universities accredited by the Malaysian government on 11th October 2006 to become Malaysia's primary research and educational hubs. The first four public universities selected are Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia. In 2010 Universiti Teknologi Malaysia had also been conferred the status. There are four elements that each university have to fulfil namely; Fields of study focusing on research, competitive entry requirements, quality lecturers and ratio of 1:1 undergraduates to post graduates.

Universiti Sains Malaysia was established in 1969. The Oral History Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia was set up in April 1982 under the chairmanship of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Development), Professor Sharom Ahmat. It comprises representatives from the following branches of the university; the Library, the Educational Technology Unit and the History Section of the School of Humanities. The committee meets periodically to evaluate research projects and to locate funds to finance the projects. The first Oral History project under the USM's programme was the 'Japanese Occupation of the Northern Peninsular States of Kedah, Perak and Pulau Pinang'. It was a two year project involving lecturers and students from the History Section. The tape recordings of the interviews was catalogued and indexed in the USM Library for convenient reference.

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia which was established in 1970, is the first institution of higher learning in Malaysia to use the Malay language. Department in History, UKM

introduce Oral History in 1981/1982 as an academic subject with the objective both to enhance students' knowledge on the theory and practice of oral history; and to participate in documenting significant oral historical information for the need of interested future scholars. This course was first introduced to the third year student, designed to acquaint students with certain amount of basic knowledge and understanding of the concept of oral history. Such knowledge will enhance the student's skills when undertaking research in writing academic exercise of not less than 15000 in length as partial requirements in order to obtain their honours degree in humanities or social sciences. As partial requirement of the course students are required to participate in the documentation project identified by the instructor or on a subject chosen by the student. The recorded interviews are to be transcribed and edited. Copies of the taped interview and the transcription will be submitted for evaluation. The tapes and the transcription were placed on deposit in the Pusat Sumber Sejarah Lisan of the History Department, UKM, providing the interviewees give their permission after the process is completed.

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (Previously known as The National Institute of Technology) was established in March 1972. It was developed from the Technical College in Kuala Lumpur. Courses are provided at both diploma and degree levels in the fields of engineering, architecture, building science and surveying. Library was built in the late 1970's or early 1980's. No specific information on Oral History collection found in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Library but it is assumed that the collection which is currently being developed is part of their corporate memory activities.

The University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, had its roots in the earlier University of Malaya founded in Singapore in 1949 by the amalgamation of the King Edward VII College of Medicine (established in 1905) and the Raffles College (1928). After Malaysia (then the Federation of Malaya) had achieved her independence in August 1957, a Division of University of Malaya was established in Kuala Lumpur. On January 1, 1962, the Kuala Lumpur division became the University of Malaya. The library has a rich collection of materials relating to Southeast Asia in the form of books, manuscripts, microfilms and microfiche.

The University of Agriculture at Serdang had its origins in the earlier School of Agriculture which was founded in 1931. This school was raised to the status of a college in 1947. In 1971, the College of Agriculture was merged with the Faculty of Agriculture of the

University of Malaya to form the University of Agriculture which in 1997 known as Universiti Putra Malaysia.

As for both Universiti Malaysia and Universiti Putra Malaysia Libraries, historically, there was no specific data or information available with regards to Oral History collection and activities.

Amid the five Research University's major focus on research, study needs to be done as to see the existence and the current status of oral history collections in each libraries in order to see whether their collection supports and widen new research ideas and learning process of each local public higher education institutions.

### **3. RESEARCH METHOD**

This study has been chosen because evidently no research has been done to identify current status of oral history collection in Malaysian research university libraries. Questionnaires were distributed to five selected respondent through e-mail and phone interview was also conducted for the purpose of collecting primary data. The respondents were librarian from Special Collection Division at Malaysian Research University libraries namely Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The survey consisted of 15 questions focusing on availability, formats, types of physical treatment, topics covered, accessibility to users and researchers, usage of oral history collections and barriers in collecting and conducting oral history as resources for research and archives. All questionnaires were returned, completed and usable for analysis. The data gathered was analyzed and interpreted accordingly.

### **4. FINDINGS**

Below are the findings based on the questionnaires sent to five research university libraries in Malaysia:

#### 4.1 Demography

Demographically, all Research University libraries have more than 10,000 students with doctoral level as their highest degree offered.

#### 4.2 Availability

The survey was completed by 5 respondents. Of the 5 respondents, only 3 libraries (60%) namely USM, UKM and UTM library indicated that they currently retain oral history collections. UM Library pointed out that they only keep oral history resource but not developed or considered as part of their library collection whereas UPM Library does not collect oral history since it was not in their collecting scope or policy. Therefore, it is understood that oral history collection is not available in both of these libraries and the 3 respondents with oral histories in their collections form the basis for all subsequent results analyzed here.

Assessing the current size of the existing collections among the 3 institutions, UTM library has the biggest number of oral history collections, owning between 26 to 50 of them as compared to USM and UKM library which only hold approximately 1 to 25 oral history recordings. Acquisition or collecting guidelines greatly simplified the process of adding these materials to the oral history collection. From the survey, UTM Library is the only respondent that has an established policy regarding the collection, processing and use of oral history collection.

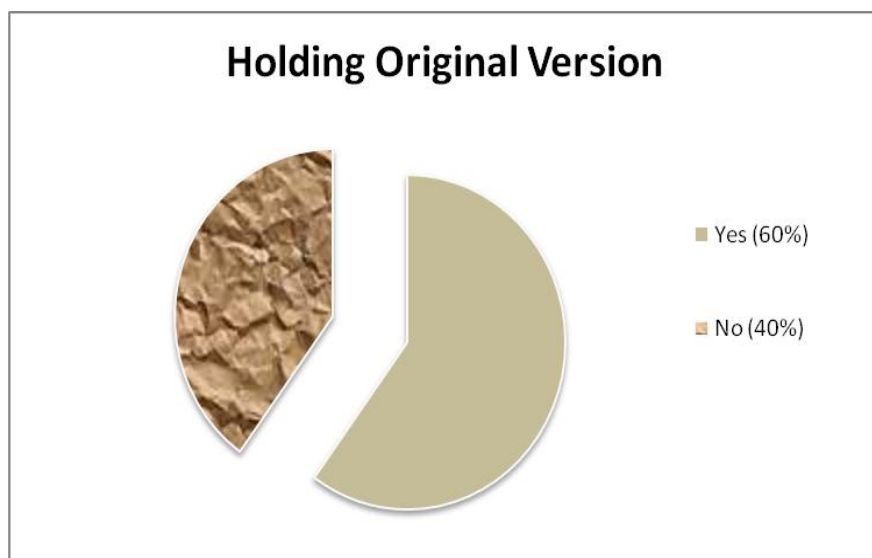


Figure 1: Oral history collection holdings

### 4.3 Formats

Typically oral history exists in multiple formats. Among the 3 survey respondents, it was found that audio tapes and typed/handwritten transcript are the most commonly held format. The survey shows that the libraries are aware that digital format will become more prevalent in the future and Oral history collections previously available in audio taped formats are in danger due to media deterioration, thus in need of format refreshment or transfer into new medium. In UTM library, oral history collections are available in audio compact discs and digital-video-discs (DVD), whereas USM library also holds the collections in digital-video-discs (DVD) and digital files format.

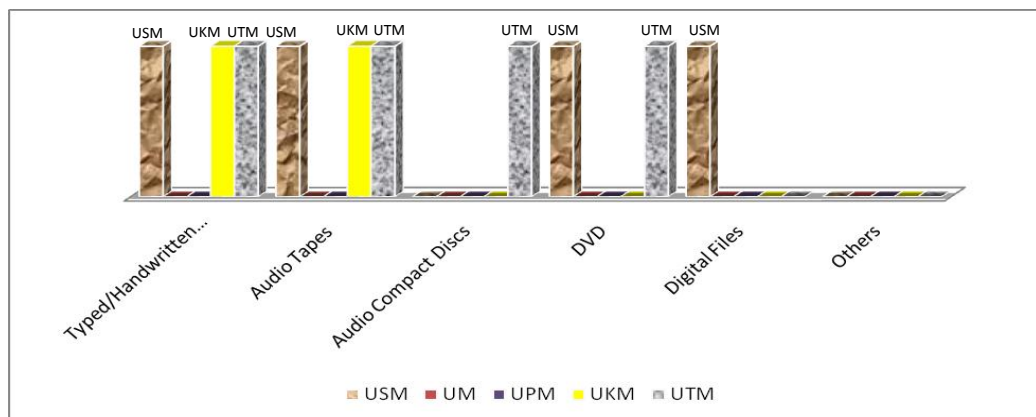


Figure 2: Format of oral history collection holdings

### 4.4 Types of physical treatment

Among the three research university libraries, it was found that UTM library has been keeping its oral history collection well. It made use copies of recordings, migrate deteriorating formats to digital, keep photocopy of oral history on acid free paper, housed transcripts in acid free folders and stored original recording in archival containers. As for USM and UKM library, both made use copies of recordings. However, USM library migrated deteriorating formats to digital while UKM library keeps photocopy of oral history on acid free paper.



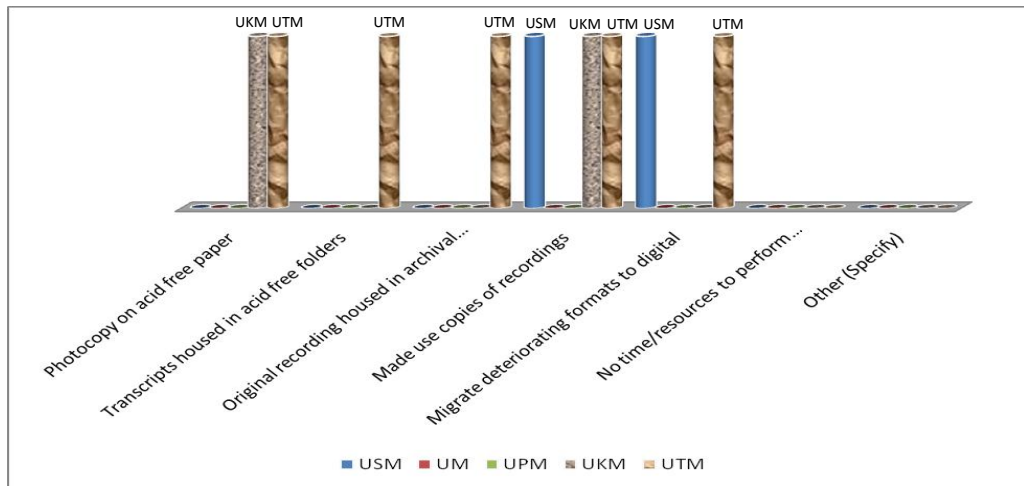


Figure 3: Physical treatment of oral history collections

#### 4.5 Topics covered

It was found that the three research university libraries have collected various topics of oral history. USM library covered topics on Japanese occupation in Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia and Prominent figures of Penang. As for UKM library, oral history collected are on the subject of Pre-establishment of the National University of Malaysia; the University in its early years (Post Establishment) and History of Early Faculties while UTM library collects topics on the University, its current affairs and management.

	USM	UM	UPM	UKM	UTM
Topic Covered	1. Japanese Occupation in Northern Region of Peninsular Malaysia 2. Penang Prominent figures 3. "Kenangan Abadi" Collection (Corporate Memory)	NIL	NIL	1. Pre-Establishment of the National University of Malaysia 2. The University in its early years (Post Establishment) 3. History of Early Faculties	1. UTM 2. Current Affairs 3. Management

Figure 4: Topics of oral history collection

#### 4.6 Accessibility to users and researchers

In USM library, the main faculty that has been accessing oral history collection is the School of Humanities while for UKM Library, School of History is their main client whereas School of Management has been using oral history collection in UTM Library. Systematic representations to aid in discovery as well as individual ability to use materials once patrons are aware that they exist should be created. These libraries provide access on oral histories to their users and researchers through full MARC records in Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). This format allows users to conduct more useful and productive searches of library holdings. It was also discovered that, printed and web-based finding aids or lists of oral history collections are commonly used by UKM and UTM library as a mean of access.

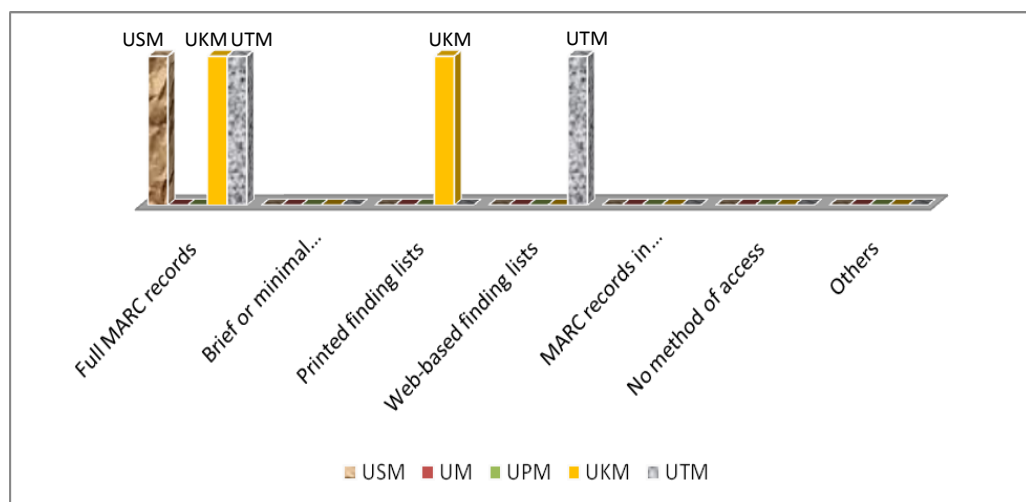


Figure 4: Accessibility of oral history collection

#### 4.7 Usage of oral history collection

The survey indicates that the usage of oral history collection for research purposes in the three respective institutions is between the range of 1 to 25 per year.

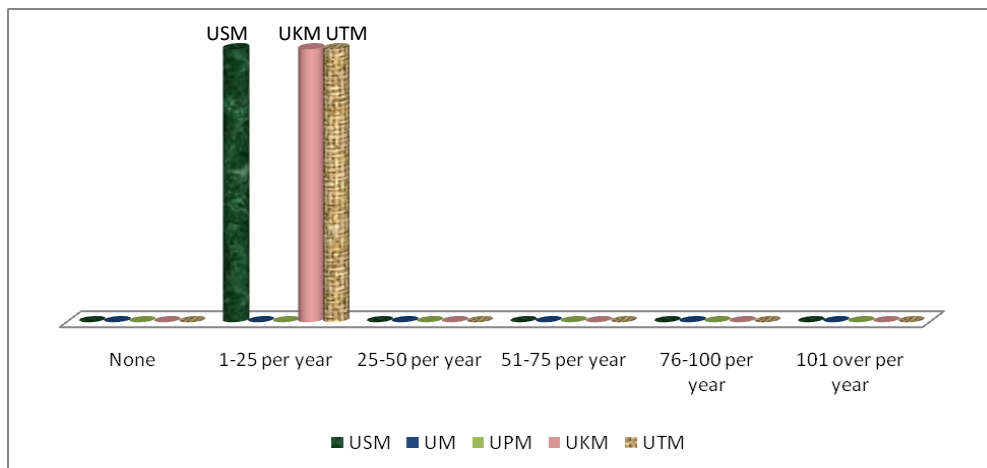


Figure 5: Usage of oral history collection

#### 4.8 Barriers in collecting and conducting oral history as resources for research and archives

Creating or maintaining access to oral histories presents several barriers and challenges. Barriers faced by USM library were to identify the subject for oral history interview; setting an appointment for interview whereby all the committee members i.e. interviewer, interviewee, cameraman and crews could allocate the time; and no expertise in doing transcription. UKM library mentioned that they do not have proper facilities or equipment of high quality audio visual capacity to conduct oral history while UTM library expressed that it is time consuming to conduct the activities.

From the above findings, it could be summarized that not all of the research university libraries in Malaysia hold oral history collection. The size of the collection currently retain by the libraries are not as big compared to their years of existence. Policy regarding oral history acquisition and collection is still lacking and need to be established to properly manage the existing collection. The old oral history collections which were recorded using audio tape are still being kept, while current activities are recorded using new digital formats. As for physical treatment of oral history collections, preservation and conservation activities are still being carried out in order to sustain the resources. Topics covered in oral history collection in these libraries were different, addressing the subject of local history and corporate memory could be further developed should the librarians aware of the needs and current research

trends embraced by their researchers. Considering the uniqueness and research value of oral histories, accessibility of oral history collections in these libraries could be further enhanced to assist researchers in discovering and using the materials. The usage level of this collection could be increased with better collection development strategies, adding topics that have research value, continuous promotion and collaborating with other professionals and researchers. Barriers faced by the library in collecting and conducting oral history could be overcome by giving more focus on the activity itself, studying the cost and funding issue, educating 'would be' historians – students, historians and the public on the importance of historical documentation and collaborating with faculty members who are interested in the projects.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Oral history has been an important research methodology and tapes and transcripts need to be effectively integrated into academic library collections. According to Swain (2003), archivists and librarians must assume an active role in oral history discourse, collaborate with each other and colleagues in other fields, and be attuned to current scholarship needs if archives and special collections departments are to be viable, utilized research sources in the future. Zachert (1968) mentioned that oral history provides a unique opportunity for academic librarians to draw on their research expertise, public relations skills, and knowledge of collection gaps to make a “creative, intellectual contribution.” In other words, archivists and librarians must be knowledgeable about research trends and needs of their users. They must be aware of collection gaps, become familiar with their user groups, keep tabs on what questions are being asked, develop relationships with faculty on campus, and enhance their knowledge of their collection subject area or identify and connect with those who are experts in the subject. If archives and libraries are to be relevant and responsive to the research interests of their users, they must seek out and identify the resources these users need through oral history, active collection development, and appraisal. If they do not hold the resources needed by current scholars, scholars will go elsewhere.

There is a beautiful Malay proverb which says “*Harimau mati meninggalkan belang, manusia mati meninggalkan nama*” meaning “One’s good deeds will never be forgotten”. It indicates that a man is remembered for his good deeds of what he has accomplished, history that he has made and educated him and shaped his destiny. Oral history is a valuable research tool with historical value and nature. The academic community must place emphasis

on the entire cycle of oral histories if future generations of scholars are to benefit from their rich content. It is up to the library to rejuvenate these materials by preserving and providing dynamic access.

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