

COAST: ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN COASTAL KENYA THROUGH AURAL MEMORY ARCHIVES

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INTRODUCTION

The coastal region of Mombasa, Kenya, holds significant cultural heritage representing centuries of interaction among diverse cultures. However, this heritage is under threat due to environmental degradation and economic pressures. The CoaAST project (Coastal Aural Archive of Spaces & Time), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through the network Rising from the Depths, and conducted in collaboration between Bournemouth University and the National Museums of Kenya, aimed to explore the intangible cultural heritage of coastal communities through an aural archive. The CoaAST project was part of the broader Rising from the Depths network, which aimed to utilize marine cultural heritage to foster sustainable social, economic, and cultural benefits across East Africa. Funded by the UK Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) through the Arts and Humanities Research Council Network Plus scheme from 2017 to 2021, the CoaAST project stimulated ethical, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth while building social cohesion in coastal regions. By working with young children from around Mombasa, the community acquired, created, and curated a collection of audio memories through generational interactions. This archive is designed to prompt a dialogue on shared cultural memory and the Anthropocene, accessible to the public. This dialogue is deeply rooted in the rich oral traditions of the Mijikenda tribes, where storytelling, ceremonies, and council gatherings play a crucial role in communal memory and identity preservation.

Historical Context of Coastal Kenyan Culture and Conservation

The East Kenyan 'Peoples of the Coast' have traditionally harnessed marine resources for economic and cultural benefits, engaging in activities like dhow building and fishing.¹ However, modern challenges such as overexploitation and development policies have threatened this marine cultural heritage, with significant damage reported in the coastal regions.² To address these threats, the "Improved Conservation and Governance for Kenya Coastal Forest Protected Area System Project," funded by GEF and implemented by UNDP and WWF Kenya from 2007 to 2012, focused on improving the conservation of coastal forests, enhancing governance, and promoting community involvement and sustainable livelihoods to reduce forest resource pressure.³ Despite progress in conservation status and

community engagement, the project faced obstacles like financial constraints, stakeholder coordination issues, and socio-economic pressures, complicating its objectives.⁴

In Kenya, the construction of national identity and memory is challenged by its colonial past and exacerbated by political exploitation of ethnic divisions, for example during the 2008 post-election violence. Efforts to address these issues include the establishment of the Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) in 2009, which aimed to address historical injustices and promote an inclusive approach to heritage management. The unbanning of the Mau Mau in 2003 catalyzed a reevaluation of their role in Kenya's national identity, leading to public and legal actions to recognize and compensate Mau Mau veterans, sparking debates on memory and justice. The 2010 constitution emphasized local community involvement in heritage management, supporting more participatory approaches. Recently, activists like Ojango Omondi have had to navigate political manipulations during protests, which complicates efforts to cultivate a unified national identity (Coombes, Hughes, and Munene 2019; Ross 2024).⁵ The continuation of efforts to unify national identity and address historical injustices in Kenya illustrates the enduring challenge of reconciling community-based conservation and heritage management with broader socio-political realities.

This localized approach reflects a broader trend across Africa where communities are seen as key conservation stakeholders. The shift from consultation to partnership provides legal frameworks for community involvement in forest management.⁶ Community groups, including the Mida Creek Conservation and Awareness Group and the Community Environmental Sustainable Mariculture Self-Help Group (ComEnSuM), spearhead initiatives like beekeeping, ecotourism, and mangrove restoration. These efforts regenerate degraded forests and offer alternative livelihoods.⁷ Furthermore, the Kenya Coastal Development Project, supported by the World Bank and the Global Environmental Facility, aims to enhance local incomes through sustainable fisheries and aquaculture while promoting infrastructure development and training. Despite potential, the marine fishery sector in Kenya remains underutilized, with actual production significantly lower than its estimated sustainable yield.⁸

Aligned with the United Nations Millennium Development Goal 7.A, the CoaAST project engages with the marine intangible cultural heritage of West Africa to encourage community-led discussions on landscape and memory, integrating sustainable development principles into local policies. This initiative highlights significant challenges in Kenya's coastal region, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and economic vulnerability, while enhancing community awareness and involvement in preserving both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The region's economic activities, particularly tourism, often conflict with heritage conservation. To mediate these conflicts, CoaAST involves local educational institutions in creative activities that promote responsible tourism and generate income from cultural industries, supporting sustainable heritage conservation practices. Additionally, CoaAST regards African languages as vital mediums of cultural transmission, which enhances their development and contributes to the community's cultural and economic advancement.⁹

The use of an aural archive increases the visibility and appreciation of local languages and practices, seen as fundamental to religious observation, governance and education. In pre-colonial Coastal Kenya, the Mijikenda worshipped through communal and private practices, offering sacrifices in sacred sites like forests, caves, and hilltops without written scriptures.¹⁰ Governed by a council of elders, Mijikenda resolved disputes and maintained cultural and environmental sanctity, particularly in the sacred Kaya forests which served as spiritual and biodiversity reserves.¹¹ Traditionally, learning was imparted through storytelling and apprenticeships by elders, emphasizing practical skills for societal roles.¹² Communication relied on verbal messages, drum beats, and smoke signals, adapting to technological constraints.¹³ These long-standing practices were referenced and iterated upon in order to document linguistic connections with the landscape and local identities, raising awareness of cultural practices and their significance.¹⁴

To build on these foundations, the project sought to facilitate discussions among stakeholders, NGOs, and the community on maritime heritage and environmental impacts, creating a platform for inclusive dialogue. Key objectives included understanding community perceptions of socioeconomic changes, the potential impact of creating an archive on local cultural values, and how an archive of oral histories might influence community identity and participation in heritage discussions.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, the "research team" refers to a diverse group of researchers and stakeholders who contributed directly to the CoaAST project. This approach ensured that the project was a collaborative effort that brought together local expertise and international support. Among these stakeholders were Mwadime Mwaza for the Fort Jesus Museum, which is managed by the National Museum of Kenya and located in Mombasa. The project also included educational institutions such as Majaony Seaview Academy, represented by Headteacher Mr. Zacharia Ngungu, and Lifog Centre Primary School, represented by the Managing Director Mr. David M. Lewa (Bamburi). David Taura, who leads the ComEnSuM Mangrove Rehabilitation Group, collaborated with the CoaAST project for two years by hosting school trips at the ComEnSuM. Alessio Modrian, co-founder of Il Corpo Nel Mondo ACSD, has been instrumental in supporting education in the Utange community in the area.

These stakeholders brought invaluable local knowledge, expertise, and dedication to the project, ensuring that the research was deeply rooted in the community it aimed to serve. This collaborative approach enriched the research and generate a sense of ownership among the local participants.

The research team employed a multidisciplinary approach combining arts, anthropology, education, heritage development, creative computing, and marine science. The overarching methodology is **Community-Based Participatory Research**. This was instrumental for the community and ensured that the research was aligned with their perceptions and goals. Within this framework, the project introduced a series of interlinked approaches. **Co-inquiry** involved engaging directly with community members as partners in research rather than subjects of study. While working under a co-inquiry methodology the community introduced additional approaches: **Talking whilst walking** and **Research through Storytelling** which allowed for the exploration and recording of local narratives.¹⁵ The **Archiving as Research** methodology foresaw children from LiFoG Living Fountain of Grace and Majaoni Seaview Academy collecting audio recordings of memories, sounds, and stories from their community. The collected data was organized into a digital archive, which was made accessible online and later exhibited at the 2022 Design Biennale in London, also accessible online. These four methodologies and how they were used within the project are unpacked below and illustrated in Fig 1.



Figure 1. COAAST Community-Based Participatory Research Framework: This diagram presents a holistic approach integrating four key methodologies.

The cooperative inquiry (co-inquiry) methodology, foundational to this project, emphasizes ethical decision-making and active participation, encapsulating research conducted with people rather than on them.¹⁶ This approach prioritizes local knowledge and aligns research goals with the community's needs, empowering participants as active agents in their local contexts.¹⁷ Heron and Reason developed this method to ensure that research is democratic, inclusive, and produces relevant, meaningful outcomes. Cooperative inquiry, based on transformative epistemology, deepens understanding of human conditions and involves community members—children and elders from local schools—in the research process. This method, described as "slow praxis," emphasizes sustained relationships and the significance of local contexts, promoting a participatory atmosphere where all participants contribute to method development, data interpretation, and reflective discussions.¹⁸ This deep engagement enriches the research with a dynamic interplay of reflection and practical experience, broadening and deepening the insights gathered.

Community members guided our fieldwork along Mtwapa Creek, straddling Mombasa and Kilifi Counties, providing an invaluable opportunity to explore the area's geography and associated memories. The "talking whilst walking" method combines walking with memory archiving to enhance qualitative research by situating discussions within their geographical context.¹⁹ An important aspect was that the walk with different individuals was important as different sites carried significances relevant to their own experiences of the place: "Every individual navigates a sensory universe tied to a personal history... Walking in the same forest, different individuals are sensitive to different stimuli. There is the forest of the mushroom picker, the rambler, the fugitive, or Aboriginal, the forest of the hunter, gamekeeper or poacher; the forest of lovers, vagabonds [...] a thousand forests in one".²⁰ This approach allowed us to develop a "collage of collaborative knowledge",²¹ capturing a deeper understanding through the dynamic interaction between individuals and their surroundings. This walking method elicited memories and insights that might remain untapped in traditional, stationary interview settings, offering a deeper insight into the symbiotic relationship between people and places. This approach challenges researchers to consider identities as both personally and spatially constructed underscoring the significant role of place in shaping and expressing human identity.²² Additionally, it democratized the research process, breaking down conventional power dynamics between researchers and participants, and promoting a more collaborative and empathetic knowledge exploration.

In the context of the co-inquiry methodology employed by the research team, storytelling is acknowledged as an important tradition within Kenyan communities, acting as a crucial mechanism for the preservation and transmission of heritage and knowledge.²³ These narratives are typically shared in social settings such as family gatherings and community meetings, where they function not only as a form of entertainment but also as vital educational tools. These stories often weave together moral lessons that are essential for instilling values of respect and community cohesion.²⁴ Storytelling in Kenya is inherently communal and involves children, making the practice highly interactive and dynamic. It encompasses discussions, physical activities, and tasks that are designed to reinforce community norms and values. Moreover, the stories imparted during these sessions carry practical knowledge that is pertinent to significant social occasions, including weddings and religious ceremonies. Storytelling, in this sense, is essential for ensuring cultural continuity.²⁵

In the CoaAST project, teachers encouraged children to engage directly with elders, asking questions to spark discussions on topics related to their local environmental and cultural heritage. To deepen the understanding of these narratives' impact on space and identity, the project also drew on Moore's insights that "the organization of space is a cultural representation—and it is through this representation that the individual constructs both herself/himself and her/his image of the world".²⁶ This theoretical perspective helped frame how stories and their spatial contexts are intertwined, influencing both individual and collective perceptions of their environment.

Building on this foundation, the CoaAST project sought to archive examples of these rich storytelling traditions, transforming them from ephemeral spoken words into lasting aural memories. This archival effort served as a bridge connecting the oral traditions deeply rooted in Kenyan culture to modern methods of cultural preservation, thus ensuring that these valuable narratives could inform and influence future generations and policy decisions.

By engaging with such archives, stakeholders and policymakers could gain valuable insights into the community's cultural and environmental narratives, informing inclusive decision-making processes. The archive's role extended beyond preservation, acting as a dynamic space where social power is negotiated, contested, and confirmed.²⁷ As a product of the community's need for validation of their stories, identities, narratives, and their perception of the maritime heritage, the archive became an invaluable tool in preserving a diverse local heritage.

IMPLEMENTATION

The CoaAST project engaged the local community through a series of interconnected. Initially, the project team, comprising experienced researchers familiar with cooperative inquiry, met with teachers to introduce the research concept and engage with the community and school children. This meeting set the foundation for the project, emphasizing the shared goals and participative nature of the research.

The project utilized the "initiators' call" method to involve community members. This approach allowed the community to shape the research focus and methodologies from the beginning, ensuring alignment with local interests and needs.²⁸ The initial sessions included comprehensive discussions on cooperative inquiry procedures, ethical considerations, and participant consent, creating an informed and collaborative atmosphere.

Subsequently, children were equipped with audio recorders to capture community memories, which included accompanying metadata and visual documentation to enrich the archival content. These efforts culminated in several days of structured activities at local schools, where children interacted with elders to ask questions and gather oral histories, enhancing their understanding of local traditions and environmental issues.

These activities also extended to practical fieldwork, including "show and tell" sessions and observations of local environmental changes such as village flooding and mangrove conservation efforts. This hands-on approach not only provided valuable empirical insights but also engaged children in active learning about their surroundings.

Finally, the project team curated the collected data into a digital archive, translating selected recordings for broader accessibility. This archive was then prepared for public exhibition, showcasing the rich cultural and environmental narratives gathered through the project, thus providing a platform for continued dialogue and community reflection on the shared heritage.

CONCLUSION

The CoaAST project was designed with a transformative focus, aiming to initiate changes and improvements within the local community. This approach aligns with the co-operative inquiry method, emphasizing practical and transformative outcomes. CoaAST sought to actively research with the community, prioritizing transformation and ensuring a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the local core values and connection to the environment. The participatory nature of the project provided an inclusive platform where community members, particularly children and educators, could shape the research focus, creating a collaborative atmosphere. This approach highlighted the community's agency in preserving their heritage and supported a sense of ownership and pride in the local cultural identity.

A key outcome of the CoaAST project was the creation of an aural archive, which documents the rich cultural heritage of the Bamburi Beach community. This archive, accessible online, allows a broader audience to engage with the community's heritage, providing a platform for global interaction and dialogue. As part of its impact, the archive preserves oral histories that might otherwise be lost amidst rapid environmental and social changes, ensuring that these narratives remain accessible for future generations. The act of documenting and curating these stories reinforced the importance of local languages and traditions, which are integral to the community's cultural resilience. Exhibiting the aural archive has played a crucial role in making the intangible aspects of cultural heritage tangible. By providing a physical space for interaction with these cultural narratives, the project offered experiential learning opportunities that deepened the community's and visitors' engagement with local heritage. This aspect of the project created new opportunities for intergenerational learning, where the younger generation could reconnect with their roots while contributing to ongoing heritage preservation efforts. Furthermore, the project facilitated the expansion of educational focus through partnerships, such as with ComEnSuM, which has established connections with local schools to integrate environmental sustainability into their programs alongside cultural heritage. Through these partnerships, the project strengthened local capacity to address broader challenges such as climate change, resource management, and economic vulnerability. Initiatives like mangrove restoration and mariculture not only reinforced the symbiotic relationship between culture and environment but also provided alternative livelihoods for the community, showing how cultural heritage conservation can align with sustainable development goals.

Adopting methodologies such as 'talking whilst walking,' storytelling, and archiving as research, CoaAST made explicit the connection between people, place, and memory. These approaches democratized the research process, breaking down traditional hierarchies between researchers and participants, and allowing for a more empathetic and holistic exploration of cultural identity. The resulting archive serves as both a repository of memories and a tool for dialogue, enabling stakeholders to address socio-economic challenges while preserving the community's intangible heritage.

Ultimately, CoaAST demonstrated how interdisciplinary, participatory research can bridge the gap between heritage conservation and contemporary challenges. The project contributed to the preservation of the cultural narratives of the Bamburi Beach community but also inspired a forward-thinking model for addressing environmental and social issues through inclusive and sustainable practices. By making the intangible tangible, CoaAST has laid the groundwork for future initiatives to build on its success, building up resilience and continuity in coastal Kenyan communities.

NOTES

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- ¹³ Kwasi Ansu-Kyeremeh, ed., *Indigenous Communication in Africa: Concept, Application and Prospects*, 2nd ed. (Accra: Ghana University Press, 2005).
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