ECHOES OF ENDURANCE: REVIVING KENYA'S VANISHING VOICES AND VISIONS

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Abstract

In this research, we propose to delve into the endangered cultural and linguistic heritage of Kenya's El Molo and Suba communities. We aim to document their oral histories, daily practices, and linguistic subtleties through qualitative methods like interviews and observation, employing modern digital tools for comprehensive preservation and global sharing. This study collaborates closely with local communities and the Wikimedia user group to protect these fading cultures and enhance global understanding and appreciation of their significance. The project anticipates fostering collaborative preservation efforts and generating insights with broader impacts on cultural sustainability and educational resources

Introduction

In this research, we aim to document and preserve the cultural and linguistic heritages of two Kenyan ethnic communities residing on the shores of the nation's largest lakes: the El Molo by Lake Turkana and the Suba along Lake Victoria. This endeavour is driven by the urgent need to safeguard these communities' unique traditions and languages, which stand on the brink of extinction. By bridging the gap in underrepresented content, this project aligns with Wikimedia's mission of fostering knowledge equity and diversity, aspiring to enrich global repositories with the rich cultural tapestry of the El Molo and Suba peoples.

The El Molo

Tracing their origins back to around 1000 BC from Ethiopia, the El Molo settled in the Turkana Basin, transitioning from agriculture to a lifestyle centered around lakeside fishing due to the arid conditions they encountered. Today, they are concentrated along Lake Turkana's southeast shore, particularly in Marsabit District. Despite historically speaking the Cushitic El Molo language, it is now nearly extinct, with the last fluent speaker passing in 1999. Nevertheless, language fragments persist in songs, greetings, and rituals, underscoring the community's resilience and the pressing need for cultural documentation.

The Suba

Identified as Olusuba, the Suba community's roots can be traced to a diverse Bantu background, from Uganda to various Kenyan tribes. Settling on Lake Victoria's islands and mainland, the Suba's rich heritage is manifested through languages resembling Luganda, Lusoga, and Luhya, yet distinctively their own. The annual Rusinga Island Cultural, Religious, and Arts Festival (RICRAF) underscores the community's cultural vibrancy and highlights the scarcity of well-documented cultural practices. The decline of the Suba language, exacerbated by educational preferences for English and Luo, represents a significant challenge to preserving this community's linguistic identity.

Through the lens of "Echoes of Endurance," we aim to capture the essence of these communities' cultural practices, languages, artefacts, and the very soul that binds them to their ancestral lands. This research contributes to the global knowledge base. It is a testament to the enduring spirit of the El Molo and Suba

peoples, ensuring their voices resonate with future generations.
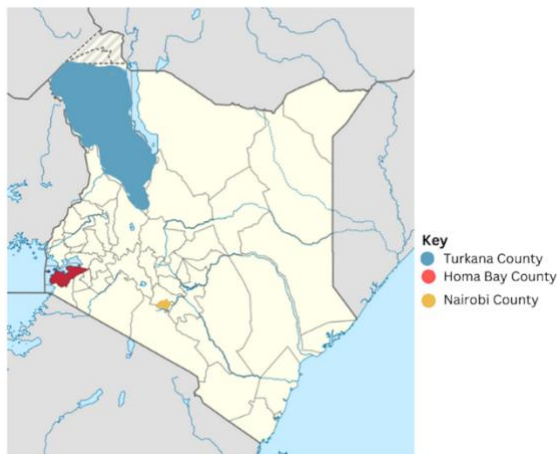
A map of Kenya showing the location of Turkana, Homabay and Nairobi Counties

Research Aims

The proposed research on the El Molo and Suba communities, centred around their unique cultural and linguistic heritages, is poised to provide invaluable insights into preserving endangered cultures. The alignment of the research questions with the objectives of studying these communities ensures a comprehensive approach to documenting their rich traditions for global dissemination.

1. **Utilization of Digital Platforms for Documentation**: Given the precarious state of the El Molo language and the rich yet under-documented cultural practices of the Suba people, this research explores innovative ways digital platforms like Wikipedia can serve as repositories for preserving such endangered elements. This includes developing digital archives that capture the nuances of El Molo songs, greetings, rituals, and Suba's

diverse cultural heritage showcased in events like RICRAF.

2. **Methodologies for Authentic Representation**: The project will investigate methods that ensure El Molo's nearly extinct language and the Suba's amalgamated culture are represented authentically and respectfully. This entails capturing the oral histories, linguistic fragments, and cultural practices in a manner that honours their origins and contexts, thereby providing an accurate and dignified portrayal of these communities on global platforms.

3. **Optimizing Community Engagement**: Recognizing the critical role of the El Molo and Suba communities in preserving their own cultures, this research focuses on strategies to foster active community participation. By engaging community members in the documentation process, from identifying key cultural aspects to capturing and sharing their stories, the project aims to build sustainable models for cultural preservation. This empowers the communities and ensures the preservation efforts are grounded in the lived experiences and aspirations of the people themselves.

4. Ultimately, by addressing these research questions, the project aims to not only safeguard the cultural and linguistic legacies of the El Molo and Suba communities but also to enrich global cultural understanding and education. Through the collaborative efforts of academics, researchers, educators, and, most importantly, community members, this research will contribute to a broader appreciation and recognition of the world's diverse cultural landscapes.

Date: Project Timelines

Phase	Duration	Timeline	Activities
Initial Phase	2 months	June 1, 2024 – July 31, 2024	Literature review, ethical clearance, preparation of equipment, and fieldwork tools.
Fieldwork Phase	3 months	Aug 1, 2024 - Oct 31, 2024	Methodology workshop, conducting fieldwork in Turkana and Homa Bay County.
Data Analysis Phase	3 months	Nov 1, 2024 - Jan 31, 2025	Analysis of collected data from fieldwork.
Dissemination Phase	4 months	Feb1, 2025 - May 31, 2025	Community Engagement Workshops (CEW), Wikimedia workshops, and preparation of scientific outputs.
Project Finalization	1 month	June 1, 2025 - June 30, 2025	Final review, adjustments based on feedback, and project closure.

Related work

The urgency of documenting disappearing languages and cultures has garnered attention within the academic community. Yet, studies focusing on these areas, especially Kenya's El Molo and Suba communities, have been notably scarce. Despite the foundational work by scholars such as Nicholas Evans, David Crystal, and Matthias Brenzinger on language endangerment and cultural preservation, literature in the past five years has seen a significant decline in contributions that directly address these communities' unique cultural and linguistic landscapes.

Evans (2010) explores the potential of technological advancements in the digital documentation of languages. This perspective directly informs our project's approach to capturing the linguistic heritage of Kenyan communities such as El Molo and Suba. Crystal's seminal work, "Language Death" (2000), delves into the profound cultural losses precipitated by language extinction. This theme resonates with our objective of enriching Wikimedia platforms with underrepresented content, thus advancing knowledge equity. Meanwhile, Brenzinger (2017) articulates the intrinsic value of unique worldviews encapsulated within disappearing languages, underscoring the importance of authentic digital representation on platforms like Wikipedia.

Tosco (2015) and Hulme (2010) provide critical insights into the El Molo community's challenges. Tosco's examination of the Elmolo language, a nearly extinct Cushitic language, highlights the community's linguistic shift towards the Nilotic Samburu language and ongoing revitalization efforts. Hulme's discussion extends the context to the broader impact of climate change on the El Molo, emphasizing the need for a cosmopolitan approach to understanding these changes. These works underscore the intricate link between environmental factors and cultural preservation, advocating for a deeper engagement with the socio-ecological dynamics affecting indigenous communities.

Mihlar (2008) and Kiura (2005) shed light on the El Molo community's existential threats, emphasizing the detrimental impact of climate change and modernization on their traditional way of life. Mihlar (2008) highlights the critical

need for including indigenous voices in climate discussions, pointing out the El Molo's struggles with environmental changes that jeopardize their cultural and linguistic heritage. On the other hand, Kiura (2005) offers an in-depth look at their adaptation strategies and the importance of preserving such unique communities. Together, these studies underscore the value of documenting disappearing cultures as a record of humanity's diverse heritage and as a reservoir of knowledge and practices that can offer insights into addressing contemporary global challenges.

However, while these scholars lay the groundwork for understanding the broad impacts of language endangerment, there remains a gap in literature specifically documenting the cultures and languages of the El Molo and Suba communities. This scarcity highlights a critical need for focused research efforts that preserve these endangered languages and cultures and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play in their potential disappearance.
This literature review seeks to bridge that gap, drawing upon the insights of Evans, Crystal, and Brenzinger to inform a comprehensive approach to documenting the rich cultural and linguistic heritage of the El Molo and Suba communities. This research contributes to the broader discourse on cultural preservation, offering new methodologies and perspectives that can serve as benchmarks for future initiatives to safeguard the world's disappearing cultural diversities.

Methods

Our research employs a qualitative research design, mainly focusing on case studies of the El Molo and Suba communities. This approach allows us to delve deeply into these communities' specific cultural and linguistic characteristics, capturing the complexity and

richness of their heritage in a manner that quantitative methods cannot. A case study methodology is chosen because it facilitates an intensive, holistic investigation of the contemporary phenomena within their real-life context. It enables the collection of rich, detailed data through various means such as interviews, observations, and audio-visual recordings, providing a comprehensive understanding of the communities' ways of life, traditions, and languages. This detailed approach is crucial for documenting endangered cultures and languages, where capturing the essence and nuances is vital for effective preservation and dissemination.

The **first phase**, expected to take two months, will involve an extensive literature review, ethical clearance application, fieldwork tools and equipment preparation, and mobilization efforts. The PI and Co-PI will spearhead this phase.

The **second phase** will begin with a methodology workshop in Homa Bay and Turkana County, followed by data collection for our study on the Suba and El Molo communities. We will employ four research assistants for each location—Homa Bay and Turkana County. These assistants will be selected from local universities, precisely those fluent in the communities' languages, eliminating the need for interpreters and ensuring a deeper cultural understanding and connection. They will focus on gathering detailed data, including:

- **Linguistic Practices**:
This includes recording variations in dialects, syntax, phonetics, and semantics across different age groups and social settings. Special attention will be paid to capturing endangered words, phrases, and linguistic structures critical to cultural identity. This effort aims to preserve these languages' richness and diversity for future generations, providing a valuable

resource for linguistic studies and cultural understanding.

- **Cultural Rituals and Ceremonies**: This will focus on understanding traditional practices through observations and recordings. This will involve documenting significant ceremonies, festivals, and rituals important to the community's cultural identity. Special attention will be given to capturing the preparations, symbolic elements, and the roles of participants in these events. This detailed documentation seeks to preserve the intricate practices that define the communities' heritage, providing insights into their social structures, beliefs, and values.

- **Oral Histories**: This will involve capturing community stories and historical knowledge through structured interviews with elders and cultural experts. This process will aim to preserve the rich oral traditions of the community's heritage, including myths, legends, family histories, and narratives of historical events. By engaging with these living libraries, the project seeks to document invaluable insights into the community's past and present, ensuring that this oral heritage is not lost but shared and understood by future generations.

- **Daily Life**: This will involve audio-visual recordings to meticulously document the everyday activities and social interactions within the Suba and El Molo communities. This will encompass various communal and individual practices, such as food preparation, craft-making, local farming or fishing techniques, and family dynamics. Capturing these moments will provide a window into the rhythms and routines that define the community's way of life, offering insights into their societal structures, values, and the interplay between tradition and contemporary life.

In our study, research assistants will select a specific stream of focus aligned with their strengths, utilizing smartphones for data collection. These devices are chosen for their integrated cameras, video, and audio recording capabilities, along with the convenience of instant data sharing, as Garcia et al. (2015) noted. Field notes will also complement digital data, ensuring a rich, multifaceted capture of cultural practices. Uniformity in data quality will be achieved by providing each assistant with the same smartphone model, equipped with a tripod and microphone, with training provided to ensure high-quality data collection. Post-project, these smartphones will be donated to the Wikimedia community user group in Kenya, supporting their ongoing volunteer efforts.

In the study's **second phase**, focusing on data analysis and synthesis, we will hold dedicated 2-day analysis workshops for the Suba and El Molo communities separately. These workshops, rich in collaboration between research assistants and investigators, will delve deeply into the collected data. The teams will employ various qualitative analysis techniques to identify and interpret thematic patterns and linguistic nuances, aiming to construct a nuanced understanding of the cultural and linguistic landscapes. Following this detailed analysis, we will conduct 1-day Community Engagement Workshops (CEWs) for each community. These CEWs are designed to incorporate community feedback, ensuring the research findings accurately represent each community's cultural and linguistic identity and honour their heritage with the utmost respect and integrity.

The **third phase** of the project will focus on data analysis of the collected data.

The **fourth phase** will focus on disseminating our findings about the Suba and El Molo communities. A critical activity will be a workshop with Wikimedia user group volunteers in Kenya, leading to a dedicated session for uploading the collected cultural and

linguistic data to Wikimedia Commons. Wikimedia Commons, often called "Wikicommons," is an online repository of free-use images, sound, and other media files. This component will be led by the co-PI, the co-founder and co-lead of the Wikimedia Community user group in Kenya. Additionally, this phase includes crafting various manuscripts, including journal and blog articles. This is vital for academic and public engagement, ensuring the broader dissemination of cultural insights and contributing to scholarly discourse and public awareness about cultural preservation efforts.

This research will undergo ethics approval at Strathmore University, emphasizing the utmost importance of ethical considerations. Informed consent will be secured from all participants, and for those hesitant to be recorded, alternative methods such as written responses or anonymized contributions will be provided. Participants will be fully briefed on the significance of this data collection and its potential impact on cultural preservation. All data collected will be securely stored on encrypted cloud platforms, accessible solely to the research team, to ensure confidentiality and integrity. This approach aims to enrich the Wikimedia knowledge base and contribute to the discourse on cultural preservation, setting a precedent for future documentation projects.

Expected output.

The project aims to generate impactful outputs. This phase will occur in the fourth phase of the research. It will include the following outputs:

- **Insights for Cultural Preservation**: Offering guidelines for policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders on preserving endangered cultures and languages.
- **Scientific Publications**: Our findings will lead to publications such as:

1. "Digital Ethnography and Revival: Documenting the Linguistic Heritage of the El Molo and Suba Communities" for possible publication in the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*.
2. Bridging Generations: Technology's Role in Preserving the El Molo and Suba Languages and Cultures" for possible publication in *Digital Humanities Quarterly* journal.
3. "Innovating Tradition: Community-Led Strategies in Preserving the El Molo and Suba Cultures" for possible publication in *Cultural Survival* journal.

- **Digital Archives and Wikimedia Commons Uploads.**: We plan to work closely with the Wikimedia Community user group. This cooperation ensures the research findings, particularly the cultural and linguistic data from the El Molo and Suba communities, are precisely uploaded to Wikimedia Commons. Our goal is to globally share this valuable data, making it an accessible resource for ongoing research, educational programs, and efforts in cultural preservation, thereby contributing to the collective knowledge and appreciation of these unique communities.
- **Events**: Community Engagement Workshops (CEWs) are scheduled after the data collection and analysis phases are completed. These workshops, intended for Homa Bay County and Turkana County, aim to engage local communities, stakeholders, and educators. Sharing the project's findings with the communities and a wider

audience, these CEWs will significantly contribute to fostering understanding, appreciation, and proactive preservation of the El Molo and Suba communities' cultural heritages.

Risks

This project is likely to navigate several challenges, including community accessibility, language barriers, technological limitations, and ethical concerns, among others. To mitigate these, strategic measures will be employed:

1. **Community Trust and Accessibility**: Utilizing Dr. Mwaura's established connections in Universities in Homa Bay and Turkana counties will be necessary. Collaboration with local educational institutions such as Tom Mboya University in Homa Bay County and Turkana University College will serve as crucial links to the Suba and El Molo communities, together with community leaders already known to Dr. Mwaura will further facilitate trust and ease access.

2. **Overcoming Language Barriers**: Recruiting Research Assistants (RAs) from within the Suba and El Molo communities will ensure linguistic compatibility and cultural congruence. This approach guarantees effective communication and data collection, bypassing the need for external interpreters and fostering a deeper understanding of the cultural context.

3. **Technological Adaptations for Data Collection**: Given the logistical and financial risks associated with high-end equipment like DSLR cameras, the project opts for smartphones as the primary tool for data collection. Their portability, cost-effectiveness, and instant data-sharing capabilities make them ideal for fieldwork, ensuring

efficiency without compromising collected data quality.

4. **Ethical Considerations and Participatory Research Model**: A participatory research model will be adopted, underpinned by Community Engagement Workshops (CEWs). These workshops ensure ethical practices and respectful cultural representation and involve community members in the research process. Through this model, the project commits to transparently sharing its objectives and findings with the community, ensuring informed consent, and providing alternatives for those hesitant about being recorded.

5. **Security risks**: Safety concerns for team members and participants will be a crucial consideration. Strategies to mitigate these risks will involve thorough risk assessments, coordination with local authorities, and implementing safety protocols for fieldwork. Engaging with community leaders and leveraging Dr. Mwaura's contacts for local insights will also play a key role in ensuring a safe environment for conducting the research. This comprehensive approach to security aims to protect all involved while maintaining the integrity and progress of the project.

By addressing these challenges through thoughtful planning and community engagement, the project aims to contribute significantly to preserving the rich cultural heritage of the El Molo and Suba communities, setting a precedent for future research endeavours.

Community impact plan

Our community impact plan is intricately designed to ensure the project's findings reach and influence a wide array of audiences, significantly extending beyond the academic community:

- **Direct Engagement with Kenyan Communities**: Establishing deep connections with the El Molo and Suba communities to ensure their stories and cultures are accurately represented and preserved.
- **Collaboration with Educational Institutions:** Partnering with schools and universities to integrate the research findings into curricula, enriching students' learning experiences with local cultural knowledge.
- **Public Outreach via Media**: Utilizing various media platforms to share insights from the research with the broader public, enhancing awareness and appreciation of Kenya's cultural diversity.
- **Working with Wikimedia Communities**: Collaborating with Wikimedia User Group to upload content to Wikimedia Commons, ensuring global accessibility. This includes:
  - Organizing edit-a-thons to engage the community in content creation and enrichment.
  - Forming partnerships with cultural and governmental organizations to advocate for policies that support cultural heritage preservation.

This multifaceted approach aims to document and preserve the rich cultural heritage of the El Molo and Suba communities and foster a wider adoption and impact of this work, contributing to the sustainability of Kenya's diverse cultures.

Evaluation

This research will be evaluated in three phases, each with specific metrics for assessment. Qualitative and quantitative measures will gauge the effectiveness of community engagement, data quality, and the reach of academic publications. The impact on Wikimedia, the success of outreach efforts, and the feedback from educational and cultural bodies will also be crucial indicators. Sustainability efforts will be scrutinized to ensure ongoing preservation activities. Key indicators across phases include active community participation, the richness of collected data, scholarly contributions, enhanced content on Wikimedia platforms, outreach success, institutional adoption of findings, and the maintenance of preservation activities. This multi-phase evaluation will allow for real-time adjustments and improvements, ensuring the project's goals are met effectively.

Budget

The detailed budget for this study can be found **here**

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1u78nc yzuCYAOq5QTb8-Q3Q0_JvG3pfWrIEx7raeyFkU/edit#gid=0

Response to reviewers and meta-reviewers

Response to review by Program Chair

- **Methodology Enhancements**: The methodology section has been significantly expanded to detail our comprehensive approach and anticipated impact more clearly.
- **Acknowledgement**: We appreciate the recognition of the proposal's relevance and high priority. Thank you.

- **Collaboration Acknowledgment**: Thank you for acknowledging the collaborative efforts between academia and community participants. We hope our project, once funded, will serve as a precedent for effective community-academic partnerships.
- **Budget and Scope Adjustment**: In response to concerns about the budget size, we have reviewed and adjusted the budget accordingly. Initially aiming to study six communities, we've refocused on two to ensure a more feasible and comprehensive analysis of the available resources.

Response to Reviewer pmfx

Thank you, reviewer pmfx, for your valuable feedback, which has significantly contributed to enhancing the quality of our work.

- **Align Budget with Outcomes**: We've carefully reviewed and realigned our budget to match our research's expected outcomes and goals more closely. Initially, the scope aimed to study six communities; however, we recognized the ambitious nature of this goal given the extensive fieldwork required. We have since narrowed our focus to two communities, making our budget more specific and manageable while planning to seek additional funding for further studies.
- **Revise Risk Mitigation Strategies**: We've refined our risk mitigation strategies, especially working with specialized communities. Detailed plans are now in place, including working closely with local liaisons and leveraging Dr Mwaura's established community relationships for smoother engagement. For potential concerns around community engagement, we've outlined clear and proactive approaches. These include community workshops to foster participation and understanding and a commitment to ethical practices to pre-emptively address and resolve any conflicts or challenges that may arise.

Response to Reviewer 7VGd.

Thank you for your feedback.

We acknowledge your concerns and appreciate the opportunity to clarify. Our project deliverables, including Insights for Cultural Preservation, scientific publications, Digital Archives, Wikimedia Commons Uploads, and community engagement events, are explicitly outlined. Regarding the dataset's size, we anticipate it to be substantial and significantly impactful, providing a rich basis for cultural and linguistic insights. The project's scope has been meticulously evaluated and adjusted to ensure cost-effectiveness, aligning the budget closely with our targeted outcomes and ensuring efficient use of resources.

Response to Reviewer vvAp.

Thank you for your feedback.

- **Methodological Approach**: We have clarified the methodology section, outlining data collection and analysis processes in detail.
- **Existing Connections**: Our team has established connections with Turkana and Homa Bay County community leaders and partnerships with local universities to facilitate engagement. Connections will be facilitated through collaborative methodology, analysis, and community engagement workshops, leveraging existing

relationships and local university networks for broader community involvement.

- **Oral Traditions**: The two communities have predominantly oral traditions with limited written records, emphasizing this project's preservation importance.
- **Recording on Wikipedia Concerns**: Should community members oppose recording their culture on Wikipedia, we will respect their wishes and focus on consensual contributions. We have provided alternative documentation methods, such as in-depth interviews and observation, where note-taking will be used.
- **Target Wikimedia Project**: Contributions will primarily target Wikimedia Commons for multimedia uploads, enriching the platform with valuable cultural and linguistic content.
- **Giving Back to Subjects**: The project plans to give back by providing and contributing to educational resources like outputs from this research, enhancing global recognition and respect for their cultural heritage through showcasing their cultural and linguistic nuances in international platforms like Wikicommons.

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