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

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Abstract

This proposal focuses on combating the cultural and linguistic extinction facing several Kenyan ethnic communities, such as El Molo, Kore, Omotik, Suba, Yaaku, and Okiek. These groups, each harboring unique traditions and languages, are at risk of vanishing, which would lead to a significant loss of human heritage. The project's aim to document these endangered cultures aligns with Wikimedia's commitment to knowledge equity and diversity, particularly addressing the underrepresentation of marginalized and indigenous groups on platforms like Wikipedia.

The project will preserve and make accessible a wealth of cultural information, thus serving specific communities and a global audience interested in diverse cultural knowledge. This research is especially relevant for academics, researchers, educators, and the general public, providing them with access to cultural details that have remained largely undocumented. The outcomes of this research are expected to provide valuable insights into the best practices for cultural documentation and preservation, establishing a framework for future projects focused on protecting endangered cultural heritage.

Introduction

The "Echoes of Endurance" project addresses the critical problem of cultural and linguistic extinction among Kenyan ethnic communities such as El Molo, Kore, Omotik, Suba, Yaaku, and Okiek. These communities, rich in unique traditions and languages, are at a precipice of disappearing, risking the loss of a significant part of human heritage. This issue is particularly pertinent to Wikimedia projects due to their commitment to knowledge equity and diversity. Addressing this problem is crucial as it will enrich Wikipedia and related platforms with diverse, underrepresented content, fulfilling Wikimedia's vision of allowing every human being to share in the sum of all knowledge.

Upon completion, this research will benefit academics, researchers, educators, and the general public globally, providing access to a wealth of previously undocumented cultural knowledge, thereby enriching global cultural understanding and education.

This proposal revolves around key research questions:
- How can digital platforms like Wikipedia be effectively utilized to document and preserve endangered languages and cultures?
- What methodologies will ensure authentic and respectful representation of indigenous knowledge and traditions?
- How can community engagement be optimized for sustainable cultural preservation efforts?

Dates: Start - June 1, 2024 – **Finish** May 31, 2025

Related work

This literature review synthesizes key insights from scholars Nicholas Evans, David Crystal, and Matthias Brenzinger on language endangerment and cultural preservation. Evans' (2010) focus on technological advancements aids our project's digital documentation of languages of Kenyan communities like El Molo and Kore. Crystal's (2000) "Language Death" highlights the cultural loss from language extinction, aligning with Wikimedia's vision of knowledge equity. Brenzinger (2017) emphasizes the loss of unique worldviews with language disappearance, which is vital for authentic digital representation on platforms like Wikipedia. This research contributes to preserving Kenya's cultural and linguistic diversity, setting benchmarks for future preservation initiatives.

Methods

This research employs a qualitative approach, blending fieldwork and analysis to document Kenya's endangered cultures and languages. Data collection involves interviews, observations, and audio-visual recordings in communities such as El Molo and Kore, supplemented by secondary data from scholarly articles and digital platforms like Wikipedia. The project will engage elders and cultural experts through community leaders, ensuring respectful participation. The analysis will combine qualitative and quantitative methods for thematic understanding and examining linguistic patterns. Data coding and pattern identification will yield insights to enrich Wikimedia's knowledge base, enhancing understanding and preservation of these cultural heritages.

Expected output.

This project's key outputs include:

- **Insights for Cultural Preservation**: Guidance for policymakers, NGOs, and community leaders on best practices to preserve endangered cultures and languages, aiding in strategy development for cultural revitalization.
- **Scientific Publications**: Findings will be published in journals like "Language Documentation & Conservation" and presented at conferences like ICLDC. Targeted at academics, researchers, and students in linguistics and African studies
- **Public APIs or Datasets**: Creation of accessible datasets containing linguistic and cultural information, benefiting linguists, researchers, and educators
- **Events**: Workshops, seminars, and webinars will be organized to disseminate findings, targeting community leaders, cultural practitioners, and educators.

Risks

This project anticipates challenges such as community accessibility, language barriers, technological limitations, and ethical concerns. To address these, we will engage local liaisons for community trust, employ interpreters for effective communication, use portable technology and cloud-based solutions for data handling, and adopt a participatory research model to ensure ethical practices and respectful cultural representation.

Community impact plan

This project aims for broad impact through direct engagement with Kenyan communities, collaboration with educational institutions, public outreach via media, and working with Wikimedia communities for content enrichment. It includes organizing edit-a-thons workshops and forming partnerships with

cultural and governmental organizations to enhance and preserve Kenya's cultural heritage.

Evaluation

The project will be evaluated using qualitative and quantitative measures, focusing on community engagement, data quality, academic publications, impact on Wikimedia, outreach effectiveness, feedback from educational and cultural bodies, and sustainability. Key indicators of success include community participation, data richness, scholarly output, enhanced Wikimedia content, outreach reach, institutional adoption of research, and ongoing preservation activities.

Budget

Budget Item	Amount ($)
Fieldwork including equipment	20,000
Local Collaborators and Interpreters	10,000
Community Engagement and Workshops	5,000
Data Analysis and Publication Costs	5,000
Outreach Activities	5,000
Contingency Fund	5,000
Total Budget	**50,000**

Prior contributions

Dr. Job Mwaura, a Research Associate at the Wits Centre for Journalism with a Ph.D. in Media Studies, brings essential expertise to "Echoes of Endurance." His research, particularly in digital policy and societal impact, as seen in works like "Silicon Savannah or Digitizing Marginalization?" informs the project's approach to the digital preservation of Kenyan cultures. Mwaura's background in technology, education, activism, and social movements, along with his achievements in media studies and grants from entities like the Mellon Foundation and Meta, underscore his ability to lead and shape this initiative effectively.

Caroline Mwaura, a librarian and co-founder of Wikimedia Community User Group Kenya, contributes significantly with her experience in gender equity, library science, and digital literacy. Her involvement in projects like Wiki Loves Women and Art+Feminism and her role in community engagement and project management enhances her suitability for the project, particularly in archiving, cataloging, and digital platform utilization. Her advocacy for cultural and human rights, complemented by her skills in information management, positions her to significantly impact the project's success in preserving Kenyan cultural heritage.

References

Brenzinger, M. (2017). Language contact and language displacement. *The handbook of sociolinguistics*, 271-284.

Evans, N. (2009). *Dying words: Endangered languages and what they have to tell us* (Vol. 6). John Wiley & Sons.

Crystal, D. (2000). Language Death. Cambridge University Press.