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Endangered Stories of Enchanted Places: Art as a Medium for Preserving and Transmitting Oral Traditions

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ABSTRACT :

This study examines how endangered oral narratives can be preserved and transmitted through artistic practice. Drawing on fieldwork in Iringa and Njombe regions and Endangered stories exhibitions series at the Iringa Boma Regional Museum[1], the study collected oral stories through interviews, group discussions, and observation; the collected stories were carefully reviewed to identify those most suitable for artistic adaptation, in paintings and comic art. The remaining narratives were thoroughly documented and compiled into a written archive. Together, they form a rich collection that includes local beliefs and traditional practices that brought different themes for the art exhibitions. Themes like Matago, rain-making practices, supernatural encounters, and Voices of Colonial Violence and Resistance that includes the narratives of Chief Mbeyela[2] conflict and the story of Nyumba Nitu. All of these represented in the Endangered Stories exhibition series. These include painting exhibition in 2021 and comic art exhibitions in 2023 and 2024, two of them curated at Iringa Boma Regional Museum and one that was curated at Nafasi Art Space[3] in Dar es Salaam.

By tracing the process from narrative collection to artistic interpretation, the article identifies effective approaches for preserving oral traditions through art. It argues that collaboration with storytellers, contextual sensitivity, and participatory exhibition design can sustain cultural knowledge and ensure its continued relevance in contemporary contexts.

Keywords: Endangered stories, enchanted places and art

1.0 Introduction

This study examines how art can preserve and revitalize oral traditions, drawing on the exhibition Endangered Stories of Enchanted Places at the Iringa Boma Regional Museum. The research explores how artistic practice can document and reinterpret traditional narratives, creating new forms of engagement between communities and their heritage.

Oral traditions have long been central to African societies, passing down history, values, and identity through spoken word and performance. Unlike written texts, these stories rely on voice, rhythm, and gesture to create shared meaning and emotion. They also express respect for nature, portraying forests, rivers, and mountains as sacred places that link people to their environment.

My experience growing up in Katanga village in the Kigoma region shaped my understanding of storytelling's importance. As children, we gathered around elders to hear tales that taught respect and responsibility. These stories, along with dances and songs, strengthened community ties. Yet, with the rise of new technologies, such traditions began to fade, prompting my commitment to preserving them.

In 2020, I joined the *Endangered Stories of Enchanted Places* project[4] as a researcher and artist to collect and reinterpret oral narratives through art. Working with other artists and community members, we transformed community's endangered narratives into visual artworks exhibited in Iringa and later at Nafasi Art Space in Dar es Salaam. These exhibitions showed how art can translate oral knowledge into new forms and inspire dialogue on cultural preservation.

This study reflects on those experiences to show how creative practice can support the transmission of oral traditions today. It considers the methods, challenges, and community responses that emerged during the project, demonstrating how art can help keep endangered stories alive for future generations.

[1] A regional museum in Iringa that serves as a hub for preserving and sharing the history, oral traditions, and cultural knowledge of the Iringa region

[2] A prominent Chief of the Bena people in southern Tanzania recognized for protecting his community and leading resistance against colonial forces during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

[3] A multidisciplinary contemporary art centre in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, that provides artists with studios and exhibition spaces, and offers a platform for creative exchange through workshops, performances, and public events.

[4] An ongoing project coordinated by fahari yetu Tanzania, set out to recognize, preserve oral traditions that have been transmitted to the generations, with the word of mouth into different artistic forms.

2.0 Literature Review

Art plays a key role in preserving and sharing endangered oral traditions, particularly within Indigenous communities. This review considers how art can transmit these stories across generations and cultural contexts.

Three theories guide this understanding. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that meaning is created through social interactions, with art capturing and conveying cultural significance in ways that audiences can interpret and reinterpret (Nickerson, 2023). Postmodernism highlights the adaptability of stories, allowing traditional narratives to blend with contemporary artistic forms and remain relevant today (Jameson, 1991). Trans-culturalism examines how cultures influence each other over time (Epstein 2009). Art exhibitions presenting oral traditions reveal how different audiences, elders and younger generations, perceive stories differently, showing how cultural mixing shapes understanding and value.

For instance, Indigenous stories displayed through contemporary artworks can resonate with elders as cultural continuity, while younger audiences may see them through modern or globalized lenses. Such interactions demonstrate that art is both a means of preserving stories and a space where cultural meanings are negotiated.

Overall, art provides a dynamic way to protect, reinterpret, and share oral traditions, ensuring their significance for present and future generations.

2.1 Empirical Review

Collecting and documenting oral community narratives requires careful attention to the voices, gestures, and contexts in which these stories are shared. Ethnographic methods are especially suitable for this work because they allow researchers to spend time with communities, observe daily life, and participate in cultural practices. Tools such as interviews, participant observation, field notes, and audio or video recordings help capture not only the content of stories but also the ways they are told and the meanings they hold. This approach ensures that research respects community members and preserves oral traditions in a way that reflects their cultural significance.

Oral narratives are often transformed into artistic expressions to keep them alive and share them more broadly. Traditional methods include music, dance, theater, sculpture, and masks. For example, the Makonde people of Tanzania carve wood masks and sculptures that represent ancestral spirits and folktales (Bortolot, 2007), while Aboriginal artists in Australia use dot painting to encode Dreamtime stories about ancestry, law, and land (Morphy, 1998). Festivals like the Ouidah International Voodoo Festival in Benin and the Festival of Masks in Côte d'Ivoire illustrate how performances, rituals, and visual art communicate spiritual and cultural narratives to communities and visitors alike.

Contemporary artists also reinterpret oral narratives through new forms. Kenyan artist Michael Soi creates paintings and illustrations inspired by local stories, gossip, and folklore, bringing urban life and oral traditions to visual art (Blogger, 2013). In South Africa, the Handspring Puppet Company uses puppetry and performance to retell traditional stories, combining oral history with theatrical techniques (Kruger, 2004). Nigerian comics such as Comic Republic adapt Yoruba and Igbo myths into superhero narratives, making traditional stories accessible to younger audiences in a modern format (John, 2021).

Together, these examples show that oral narratives can be preserved and reimagined through both traditional and contemporary artistic practices, ensuring that cultural knowledge remains vibrant and meaningful across generations.

Art-based approaches to preserving oral traditions are essential for several reasons. They facilitate the engagement of younger generations with their cultural heritage, making traditional stories more relatable and accessible (Tingatingaart, 2023). Artistic expressions such as theater, visual arts, and music not only capture the essence of oral narratives but also breathe new life into them, ensuring their relevance in contemporary society (Munda, 2024). Furthermore, these approaches promote community cohesion by bringing people together to celebrate their shared heritage through collaborative artistic activities (Afriklens, 2024).

In West Africa, the griot tradition serves as a powerful example of how art-based approaches can sustain oral narratives. Griots are professional storytellers and musicians who play a crucial role in preserving history and cultural knowledge through song and performance (Abdul-Fattah, 2020). In Senegal, griots use music and poetry to narrate historical events and genealogies, ensuring that these narratives are passed down through generations (Afriklens, 2024). By integrating contemporary themes into their performances, griots maintain the relevance of their stories while engaging younger audiences. This approach highlights the adaptability of oral traditions in response to changing societal contexts (Whitman, 2023).

Finally, art can help restore interest in endangered languages and dialects. Many oral stories are told in local languages that are at risk of disappearing. When these stories are turned into songs, poems, or plays performed in those languages, it gives the language a new purpose and audience. This can encourage young people to learn and use their native languages, helping to keep them alive. Art, therefore, becomes a tool not only for preserving stories but also for protecting the languages that carry them (Ganyi, 2013)

3.0 Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to explore how art can preserve and share oral traditions in southern Tanzania. Guided by an interpretivism/constructivism perspective, it recognizes that knowledge is built through experience and social interaction, and that reality is shaped by personal and cultural contexts. There is no single truth; each person's account adds to a broader understanding. I acknowledged that my own background influenced how I interpreted participants' stories, using this awareness to engage more honestly with the data.

The study focused on the Iringa and Njombe regions, known for strong cultural traditions and oral storytelling. These areas were selected because communities continue to transmit knowledge through myths, folktales, and spiritual narratives tied to sacred places. The study also examined the Endangered Stories of Enchanted Places exhibitions at the Iringa Boma Regional Museum and Cultural Center (2021, 2023 and 2024), which presented community stories from Kiponzelo, Makungu, Lulanzi, Nyumba Nitu, and Pawaga through paintings and visual installations, showing how art bridges traditional storytelling and contemporary expression.

The study followed a case study design, allowing for an in-depth exploration of a cultural initiative in its real-life context. A qualitative approach was used to focus on meaning, interpretation, and human experience rather than measurement. Narrative analysis examined both oral stories from community members and the artistic works inspired by them, revealing how meaning was shaped and reinterpreted through the creative process.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with other artists, museum staff, and community members, participant observation during fieldwork, exhibition preparations and public events, and review of exhibition texts, and field notes. These multiple sources ensured a rich and reliable dataset.

To maintain trustworthiness, the study followed four principles: credibility, transferability, dependability, and objectivity. Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement and cross-checking interview data with observations and materials. Transferability was addressed through detailed descriptions of the study context. Dependability was ensured by consistent data collection and analysis, and objectivity by grounding interpretations in participants' own words rather than personal assumptions.

Ethical considerations guided all stages of the research. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and scope of the study before taking part. Their consent was obtained and care was taken to ensure that each participant understood how their contributions would be used and that they could withdraw at any time. All stories and personal accounts were handled with respect, maintaining accuracy while avoiding any form of misrepresentation or exploitation. Cultural sensitivity was central to the process: interactions followed local protocols, permissions were sought from community leaders when required, and the meanings of stories were discussed collaboratively to prevent misunderstanding. These measures ensured that the study upheld the dignity, trust, and rights of all participants.

Overall, this approach allowed for a grounded and respectful study of how art can preserve and share oral traditions. Combining interpretivism philosophy, narrative inquiry, and case study design, the study showed how visual art can act as a living archive and how collaboration between artists, communities, and museums can help keep traditional knowledge meaningful in contemporary society.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Collected Stories

In both phases of the research, from the first phase in 2020–2021 to the second phase in 2023, we collected a wide range of stories that were later transformed into artistic forms. Before adapting these stories into artworks, they were carefully reviewed to decide which ones were most suitable for artistic representation. Those that were not selected were however documented and compiled into a written record of Stories.

Story 1. Shape Shifting

The visit to Pawaga[5] was filled with helpful information and many important lessons to reflect on. It took place during the Saba Saba Festival, which was held in the Pawaga ward and focused strongly on cultural themes. As a team from the Iringa Boma Regional Museum and Cultural Centre, this event provided the ideal setting for gathering material for the project and I used this moment to gather information about my topic.

The festival served as a dynamic platform for cultural exchange by bringing together a wide range of community members, including elders, children, traditional dance groups, local healers, and young people. Through meaningful conversations with these groups, important cultural issues were explored, particularly the potential loss of stories and traditions amid modernization and changing cultural landscapes. These discussions provided valuable insights into how participants perceive their heritage today and illuminated the various challenges they face in safeguarding it for future generations.

Together with the team from the Iringa Boma Cultural Centre, we took this group photo with one of the community groups that participated in the traditional festival held in Pawaga village. - Eliabu Mbonimpa {Printed with permission from depicted person(s)}

[5] A ward, and village that lies east of Iringa town, where the Great Ruaha River go through the dry plains of the Rift Valley and it Borders Ruaha National Park

Some of the comic drawings I made represent shape shifting stories, showing how people can transform into different creatures such as owls. – Eliabu Mbonimpa

Similar beliefs were also found in Ukwama, a village in the Njombe region. In this village, people shared stories of shape shifters who could turn into different animals not just elephants. Some were believed to shift into owls, especially those given special tasks such as spying on enemy villages during conflicts. These individuals used their transformed bodies to secretly gather information and protect their communities. Others were said to transform into cats, which allowed them to move silently and freely between places.

Story 2. Mkasipele (Punishing wrong doers)

In the Hehe community when it happened that you have done something that is not acceptable and it is against the law, then this person would be punished to bring sacrifice to the elders and ask for an apology. But when he repeats the same mistake more often, then this person was isolated from the community. This meant that this person will never again be considered as one of the community. From elders this knowledge was passed down through the word of mouth to the children. These children always adhered to these teaching and even when they became adults they strived to make sure that they do not go against the directives. Being separated from the community was a very huge punishment to get, especially considering from when they are still at tender age they are taught how a family should stay together. It was worse to be separated from your family forever; because of this the community in the southern part of Tanzania maintained high level of discipline between one another. This kind of punishment was considered as unworthy death (Mkasipele). So since this person has been isolated from the community his story ended there. Apart from this unworthy death (Mkasipele), people who died a normal death they were sent to the sacred places to be buried. This place was known as Matago. The corpse could be taken away from the community to the sacred place; there special ritual was done to rest the corpse. Then it was placed under the tree or a sacred cave, and the dead were left there for scavenging. People who had no troubles in the community, they are the ones who could get this respectful burial.

Mkasipele was also about people who were disabled in some way. In the case of a handicap, it would be the end of the child's life at birth. To end the life of a handicapped child was believed to prevent the curse from getting to anyone else in the family. And if a person had diseases that could not be identified or cured by the healers, then that person would be identified as a cursed one and this would lead to being taken out of the community to prevent the curse from spreading to other family members, or if that particular person could not have children after trying all the means suggested by the healers, then this could be called a disability and a person could be taken out of the family. The healer would perform a special ritual to cleanse the family members, keeping them away from curses of not bearing children.

> *(Ukioa na usipopata mtoto hiyo ni laana na inabidi tambiko lifanyike juu yako ili uweze kuwa sawa. Na ikitokea unazaa vilema hapo lazima njia mmbadala zifanyike ili kusitisha laana kuenea kwenye uko, na hii ilihusisha hata kufukuzwa kwenye uko kuepusha laana hiyo kuendelea kwa vizazi vingine.*
>
> *If you get married but don't have a child, it is believed to be a curse, and a ritual must be performed to cleanse you so that things can return to normal. If you happen to give birth to a child with a disability, alternative rituals must be done to stop the curse from spreading in the family. In some cases, the person could even be expelled from the family to prevent the curse from affecting future generations.)- Elder in Kiponzelo.*

Story 3. Rain-making narratives

During the fieldwork in Pawaga village, several local residents shared with us a long-standing belief about certain families who were said to have the power to command rain. According to these accounts, some clans were believed to possess special abilities that allowed them to either bring rain or hold it back. These families were highly respected in the community, and people often sought their help during times of drought.

One commonly told story is about a serious drought that is said to have lasted for two years. The people believe that this drought happened because the wishes or conditions of the rainmaking clans were not fulfilled. As a result, rain did not fall until the proper actions were taken. Such stories highlight the important role these clans once played in local society and how their powers were connected to the well-being of the entire community.

But this story also reminded me of my own community, the Waha from the Kigoma Region, where I grew up hearing similar narratives about rainmakers, known in our language as *abhavurati*. These individuals hold an important place in everyday life and are deeply respected for their role in society. For example, during the harvest season for cassava or maize, they are often approached and asked to stop the rain so that crops can dry properly and be stored safely. Rain may fall elsewhere, but in the areas where the crops are drying, it is believed that these rainmakers can keep the fields protected.

In the 2010s, I saw tobacco farming become a major economic activity in the village. Since tobacco is easily damaged by rain after harvest, these *abhavurati* are again called upon to hold back the rain until the crop is safely processed. Later, when the planting season begins, they are asked to bring the rains to ensure that the tobacco grows well.

Tayari abhalimye itumbaku bhabhahaye inzogo abavurati imvura ntigwe. Ntibwamenya kotwateye?

The tobacco farmers have already given alcohol to Abhavurati. They don't know that we've already planted?

Many time I heard my mother saying this statement when we just had finished planting crops then rain stopped. Most of time it happened that when the rain started then farmers would plant crops with that early rain however it was the same season of harvesting tobacco. And at this time tobacco farmers would make friendship with rainmakers to favors them in stopping rain until they are done harvesting.

After listening to the narratives from Pawaga and recalling these traditions from my own village, I was struck by how strongly they connect. They reveal that similar beliefs and practices about nature, people, and the environment exist across different regions of the country, showing a shared way of understanding the relationship between human life and the natural world.

Story 4. Supernatural encounter and Recovery

One of the stories shared during the research was told by a man who had been living in Dar es Salaam for many years. Originally from a village in the southern part of Tanzania, he had left his rural home a long time ago in search of better opportunities in the city. However, over the years, he began to suffer from repeated illnesses. Despite visiting hospitals and trying modern medicine, his health did not improve.

(Yeye alienda Dar es salaam, na aka kaa huko kwa muda mrefu sana bila kurudi huku nyumbani. Hata msiba utokee alikuwa haji. Sasa alipougua hakupona, alipelekwa hospitali zote kubwa huko mjini lakini wapi. Hadi alipokuja huku na kwenda kufanya matambiko kwenye kaburi la bibi yake akawa amepona.

He went to Dar es Salaam and stayed there for a very long time without coming back home. Even when there was a funeral, he wouldn't come. Then, when he got sick, he didn't recover he was taken to all the big hospitals in the city, but nothing helped. It was only after he came back home and performed rituals at his grandmother's grave that he finally got well.)-Elder in Pawaga, Iringa region.

In search of relief, he decided to consult traditional healers. Several of them told him that the cause of his suffering was spiritual. They said that his grandmother, who had passed away many years earlier, was calling for him. According to them, she wanted him to visit her grave and perform certain traditional rituals in her honor. They believed this would help restore his health.

Moved by this advice, he decided to return to his village. When he arrived, he went to the graveyard with some elders to look for his grandmother's grave. However, the grave had never been marked, and after many years, it was no longer clear where exactly it was located.

While they were still trying to identify the spot, something unusual happened. A white female sheep appeared and slowly walked toward the graves. The people followed the sheep as it walked through the graveyard. It stopped at a specific spot and stood there quietly. The elders and other villagers believed that this was a sign that the sheep had guided them to the right grave.

They then performed the traditional rituals at that spot, as instructed by the healers. After the rituals were completed, they noticed that the sheep was no longer there. No one had seen it leave, and it could not be found nearby.

Soon after returning to Dar es Salaam, the man began to feel much better. His illnesses gradually disappeared, and his strength returned. He strongly believed that it was his grandmother who had appeared in the form of the white sheep to guide him to her grave. For him, this experience was not only a moment of healing but also a powerful spiritual connection to his ancestral roots.

Story 5. The war, the mission and the bees

As the title appears in the exhibition *the war, the mission and the bees,* it refers to a remarkable event that took place in Yakobi village, Njombe Region. The story describes the origins of a conflict between colonial soldiers and the Bena people, focusing particularly on the battle involving the Bena community and the family of the missionary Paul Gröschel. What makes this story especially remarkable is the way bees were involved during the fighting, turning a moment of violence into a tale and belief that Germans are witches as they can command bees to fight alongside when they run out of bullet.

In the 1800s, a European missionary named Korosani (also known as Paul Gröschel) and his wife came to Yakobi to spread Christianity. Yakobi was a grassland area with scattered houses and few trees. Korosani gained a few local converts who helped him build a church, and they settled near it.

His wife was very beautiful, and news of her beauty spread quickly. Some soldiers from Chief Mbeela's army saw her and told the chief that she should be his wife. The chief ordered them to bring her to him and said Korosani should be killed if he resisted.

When Korosani heard the soldiers were coming, he set a trap by hiding nails under dry grass around his house. As the soldiers approached, Korosani and some believers went to pray in the church. His wife warned the soldiers not to come closer, but they didn't listen. She fired at them, killing some, while others were injured by the hidden nails.

(Wanajeshi wake ndio waliomwambia kuhusu huyo mwanamke wa kizungu. Basi Mbeyela akawaagiza wanajeshi wake wamlete huyo mwanamke awe mke wake. Maaskari walipoondoka Chifu Mbeyela aliandaa vyakula vingi na nyama laini, alianda maini mengi ya ng'ombe ili mke wake anayekuja afike na kula vizuri.

His soldiers were the ones who told him about that white woman. So Chief Mbeyela ordered his soldiers to bring her so she could become his wife. After the soldiers left, Chief Mbeyela prepared a lot of food and soft meat. He also cooked many stews from beef so that his coming wife would have a good meal when she arrived.)-Elder ain Yakobi

When the bullets ran out, Korosani shook a beehive under their house. The bees attacked the soldiers, forcing them to retreat. Many people believed that the German missionaries used witchcraft and a powerful one that it could control bees to fight for them after they ran out of bullets. When Chief Mbeyela heard they were looking for him, and that his soldiers had died in Yakobi he became scared and ran away to hide.

> *(Baadhi ya askari walikufa baada ya kupigwa risasi na Yule mama. Askari wa Mbeyela walikasirika sana wakataka bado waondoke naye, lakini nyuki walikuja na kuwauma sana. Na kwakuwa nguo zao walikuwa wanajifunika tu sehemu za siri basi waling'atwa sana na nyuki na walipojaribu kukimbia walichomwa na misumari ambaye Korosani alikuwa ameficha chini.Wengi walikufa siku hiyo na wale waliojaribu kukimbia walifia kwenye hilo bonde kwa sababu walipoteza damu nyingi na maumivu ya kuumwa na nyuki pia.*
>
> *Some of the soldiers died after being shot by that woman. The Mbeyela soldiers got very angry and still wanted to leave with her, but the bees came and stung them badly. Since their clothes only covered their private parts, they were stung all over, and when they tried to run, they got pierced by nails that Korosani had hidden on the ground. Many died that day, and those who tried to escape died in the valley because they lost a lot of blood and were in terrible pain from the bee stings.)-Elder in Yakobi.*

Story 6. Voices of Colonial Violence and Resistance

During the Yakobi conflict, many local soldiers under the leadership of Chief Mbeyela were wounded in battle. In response, Korosani requested medical assistance from Kidugara, a German oldest Christian mission in Njombe. A German doctor was sent to help, but his journey ended in tragedy.

Before reaching Yakobi, the doctor was seen by local soldiers loyal to Chief Mbeyela. These soldiers, having lost many of their own people in the conflict, had grown deeply distrustful and angry towards missionaries, whom they now saw as enemies. The doctor, sensing danger, attempted to defend himself with a gun. Unfortunately, it was of no use. He was captured by Mbeyela's soldiers, tortured, and injured. His genitals were cut off, and his testicles were taken as a sign of victory to Chief Mbeyela. Only his head was left intact, and it was later buried near a local church in Yakobi.

The Lutheran church located in Yakobi village in Njombe, beside which lies the grave of Dr. Albert Wiehe, who died on January 6, 1906, after being killed by the soldiers of Chief Mbeyela. Eliabu Mbonimpa. Photo credits; fahari yetu Tanzania.

This act of brutality deeply angered the Germans. In retaliation, they launched a campaign to capture Chief Mbeyela and his followers. They planned a trick to gather people in one place. The Germans offered gifts and rewards to those who agreed to help build a canal. This news spread quickly among the Bena people. Many believed it was an opportunity for work and reward, so they came forward in large numbers.

However, once the people had gathered, the Germans showed the plan they had been hiding. Women were raped, and children were left helpless while their mothers were tortured. Some women were sent back to their communities to spread fear about the cruelty of the Germans and what was going to happen to everyone hosting Chief Mbeyela or is working under Chief Mbeyela. After this, many of the Bena, including Mbeyela's subordinates, were executed. They were thrown into the trench they had been digging.

When Germans soldiers continued their search and failed to find Chief Mbeela, they turned their violence on the remaining people in the village of Utengule. Anyone who was working under the chief's command and could not reveal the chief's location was killed. As the killings continued, villagers fled and hid in underground tunnels. Germans soldiers began to search the homes and farms, but they found no one. The Bena had learned to survive by only collecting food at night.

Eventually, the Germans set an ambush. One night, they caught someone who had gone to collect food from the farms. After being captured, the person was forced to lead them to where the rest of the villagers were hiding. This led to the mass killing of the Bena people.

Story 7. The Enchanted Sanctuary of Ukwama Village

One of the defining features of Ukwama village is its extensive sacred forest, known by the community as a holy place for spiritual connection and ancestral worship. This forest is more than just a natural space; it is a spiritual sanctuary where villagers go to seek guidance, blessings, and answers from the spirits of their ancestors. The forest holds a powerful presence in the life of the community and is respected deeply by all who live nearby.

The sacred forest is governed by strict cultural rules that are meant to protect its purity and holiness/sacredness. One of the key rules is that women who are on their menstrual cycle are not allowed to enter the forest. This is done out of respect, to maintain the spiritual cleanliness of the space. Physical wholeness is also considered important. Individuals with physical disabilities are traditionally not permitted to enter the forest, as it is believed that one must be complete in body to face the spirits. Similarly, men who are circumcised are also not allowed to enter, because a part of their body has been removed. The belief is that every part of the body must be present in order to properly meet and connect with the spirits.

This sacred forest is believed to be the home of the spirits. When someone dies, their family is expected to enter the forest to introduce the spirit of the deceased to the ancestral world. If this ritual is not performed, it is said that the voice of the deceased may call out to the family, asking them to help the spirit find rest.

Story 8. Contact with the Unseen

One well-known story from Ukwama village is about an elder named Kederi. In the 1970s, Kederi was a respected village leader who played an important role in encouraging development activities, such as tree planting and community improvement projects. However, one day, after visiting a neighboring village to drink alcohol, Kederi decided to take a shortcut back home through the sacred forest. The elders and other villagers warned him not to enter the forest while drunk, as it was considered disrespectful. Kederi, feeling proud and powerful, ignored their warnings. He believed that as a leader, he could do as he pleased.

That night, while crossing the sacred forest, Kederi had a strange and frightening experience. In the middle of the path, he saw a huge fire burning. He also saw figures believed to be spirits who slapped him and warned him to stop mistreating the community. They instructed him to seek guidance from the village elders and to offer sacrifices to make peace with the spirits.

After this encounter, Kederi walked a few meters further and looked back. The fire and the figures had disappeared. He followed the spirits' advice and went to the elders, who guided him through the process of offering a sacrifice. After completing this ritual, something remarkable happened. Kederi was later recognized by the district officer for his hard work and was promoted to the position of ward executive officer.

Story 9. Litemela: The Multi-Headed snake

Litemela is a very large snake believed to live at water sources. This mysterious serpent is said to have between seven and twelve heads. In the southern coastal region, people know this creature by different names. Some call it Mbutila, but most refer to it as Litemela.

Litemela is believed to be a water deity who guards rivers, springs, and the surrounding environment. Although he looks fearsome, Litemela is not dangerous to humans. People continue their daily activities even in areas where he is believed to live. They believe that if they protect the environment where Litemela stays, they will always have water. However, if people destroy that environment, Litemela will leave, and he will take the water with him.

One example of this belief comes from Makungu village in Kilolo district. The villagers say that after cutting down trees and damaging the area around the water source, something strange happened. One night, they heard a loud roaring sound. The next morning, the river they depended on for farming had completely dried up. They believe this was because Litemela left.

Together with a research team from fahari yetu Tanzania, during site visit at Kiponzelo, a place said to be a home of Litemela, and the artwork of Litemela in the exhibition at Iringa Boma regional museum.-Eliabu Mbonimpa. Photo credits; fahari yetu Tanzania.

Litemela is also thought to be a kind of bridge to another world under the water. In Kiponzero, a place where another such snake is believed to exist, people say that certain individuals with special powers can use the snake as a passage to the underwater world. According to local folktales, there is a hidden realm beneath the surface, where mysterious beings known as “half-humans” live, creatures with only one eye, one arm, or one leg.

Story 10. Nyumba Nitu

In the highlands of Njombe, there is a mysterious and sacred place called Nyumba Nitu, which means “Black House” or “Dark House” in the local Bena language. It is not a house made by people, but a group of dark caves hidden inside a thick forest. For the Bena people, Nyumba Nitu is a very important place for worship and remembering their ancestors. The forest and caves are full of stories, and they help keep Bena culture alive.

A long time ago, when there were wars with neighboring groups like the Hehe and the Sangu, the Bena people used to hide in these caves to stay safe. The place became more than just a hiding place. It became a holy site where people could pray and connect with the spirits of their ancestors. There are some of rules for entering this forest like, visitors must remove their shoes before stepping inside and are not allowed to wear hats while in the forest. Additionally, women are traditionally not permitted to enter the forest during their menstrual periods. People believe that if you break these rules, you may face danger or bad luck.

One famous story says that settlers once tried to burn the forest, but something strange happened. Even though the fire burned all night, the next morning the forest was still standing, as if nothing had happened. Many people believe this shows that the spirits of the ancestors protected the forest. Today, Bena people still go to Nyumba Nitu to perform rituals, give offerings, and ask for blessings.

Story 11. Mfwimi (the hunter)

During the 19th century, the economy of the Southern Highlands was strongly influenced by the ivory trade, which moved from the interior to the Swahili coast. Because of this, elephant hunting became a very important and respected job. This story tells of Chota Marula, a famous and skilled hunter, who went on a journey to hunt elephants and bring ivory tusks to regional chiefs, Arab-Swahili traders, and colonial leaders.

At the same time, the story also shows that in the Uhehe kingdom, there was a clear division of work. People had different roles in the community. Some were farmers, others made clay pots, some were healers, and some were hunters. Before the arrival of the Arabs, hunters had only two main reasons for hunting. One was to bring food to their communities. The other was to gain respect in society.

A hunter was expected to make a bracelet for each animal he killed. The number of bracelets on a hunter's arm showed how many animals he had hunted. The more bracelets he wore, the more people respected him. His reputation as a brave and successful hunter made it easier for him to find a wife, since his courage and strength were highly admired.

4.2 From narrative collection and artworks production to exhibitions

After the narratives were collected, they were carefully analyzed, and some were transformed into artistic works. These works employed diverse materials, which enriched their meaning and allowed them to resonate more deeply with audiences, while effectively conveying the intended messages of the original stories. In 2021, canvas paintings were produced to visually represent narratives gathered from the community. By 2023, some of these stories were further adapted into comics, enabling them to reach a broader and more diverse audience.

Endangered stories that were turned into artworks and exhibited ta the Iringa Boma Museum, connecting visitors with stories passed down through generations (2021). –Eliabu Mbonimpa. Photo credits; fahari yetu Tanzania

Some of the comic illustrations created for the Endangered Stories exhibition. These will be used to develop a comic book so that the narratives can reach a much wider audience (2023).-Eliabu Mbonimpa. Artist; Eliabu Mbonimpa

In the exhibitions, we explored how art can carry stories and connect them to places, memories, and emotions. We worked with local materials, images, and sound to give the stories a physical presence, so visitors could experience them beyond words. A key part of this process was collecting natural materials from the places where the stories came from. We used soil, clay, branches, and even cement for their textures and meanings. For example, in the artwork about the story of Litemela, we used clay from Makungu, where the snake once lived. This allowed visitors to feel the connection between the landscape, local beliefs, and the ecological loss when the snake relocated. These choices were inspired by women in Lulanzi village, who use clay, natural colors, and tree resin to decorate their homes.

The exhibition space itself became part of the storytelling. Different soil types were spread on the floor to represent the origin of each story. In the Nyumba Nitu piece, black soil marked the sacred forest, reminding visitors of its mystery and the respect it requires. Some artworks focused on the emotions within the stories. For Matago, a bush of dry sticks held a figure hiding after being rejected by the community. The rough texture of the sticks made feelings of exclusion and loneliness tangible. In another Nyumba Nitu artwork, black fabric signaled both danger and sacredness, translating cultural rules into visual form.

Art-based approaches offer a meaningful way to preserve and transmit oral narratives because they allow stories to be experienced, not just read or heard. In my research, I observed that traditions remained alive when elders and community members were directly involved in storytelling. For example, Mzee Mng'ong'o[6] shared stories that are at risk of being forgotten, while Kederi[7] connected cultural lessons to everyday life, showing younger generations the importance of morality, cultural practices, and environmental care. Art enhanced these stories by creating immersive experiences. In the 2021 exhibition, sand was used on the floor to represent the story's environment, while the 2024 exhibition added sounds like rain, snakes, and cats to draw audiences deeper into the narratives.

However, there are important limitations. Artistic interpretations can oversimplify or change meanings, and presenting stories to outsiders can risk commodifying cultural knowledge. These challenges highlight the need for careful collaboration with communities to ensure that art supports living traditions rather than replacing or distorting them.

4.3 Practices for utilizing art-based approaches to sustainably preserve and transmit oral traditions for future generations.

4.3.1 Community-Centered Storytelling Practices

During data collection, we aimed to create an open environment where community members could share their stories freely. We often visited sites where particular narratives were known to circulate, which helped us engage participants and observe storytelling in context. In semi-structured interviews, we sometimes began with stories we had previously encountered, allowing storytelling to unfold naturally and participants to contribute relevant experiences. We chose these approaches to capture oral traditions as authentically as possible and to work within the cultural logic of storytelling.

Collective storytelling sessions revealed how narratives are shaped by both the teller and the audience. In Kiponzelo, for instance, we listened to the story of Litemela and visited the associated location. We also explored a cave believed to be protected by mysterious powers, where locals claimed spears

[6] One of the elders who shared lived experiences of colonial violence in Yakobi Village, Njombe Region.

[7] An elder who told a story about how he met forest spirits and got punished for not respecting the local customs because of his position.

would strike livestock and owls would deter those with harmful intentions. During our visit, we observed owls flying from the cave and even found one dead inside, providing a striking connection to the narrative.

Participants ranged across age and gender, and in some cases, young people provided detailed accounts before consulting elders. In Pawaga, young women selling food confirmed beliefs in people transforming into elephants to steal rice and shared a recent story about a man visited by elephants before an accident. Their accounts were consistent with those of the elders, highlighting the community's collective knowledge and the persistence of oral traditions.

To ensure ethical engagement, we sought informed consent from all participants and created a respectful space where people could choose whether and how to share their stories. Data were recorded through detailed field notes and, where permitted, audio recordings to preserve both content and context. Engaging directly with these narratives allowed me to observe stories within their cultural setting and understand how knowledge is transmitted, maintained, and shared across generations.

4.3.2 Community ownership and involvement in ongoing preservation efforts

The study found that oral traditions endure when communities lead their preservation. Stories lose meaning when removed from their setting and stored only in archives; they remain alive through daily life and intergenerational exchange. Elders share them through gatherings and work, while younger members record them using writing, sound, and video.

In Makete, an elder named Kederi described how forest spirits punished him after he broke moral rules, teaching younger listeners about morality and respect for nature. His story, documented in writing and digitally recorded, shows how oral traditions serve as community education.

Participation increases when storytelling offers clear benefits, such as learning, recognition, or income. Schools, museums, and cultural groups can strengthen this by including oral traditions in their programs. For instance, local dance groups from Iringa performed at exhibition openings, explaining the meanings behind songs and dances, which encouraged community pride and continuity. Preservation works best as a shared effort: institutions provide support, but communities remain the main guardians, ensuring oral traditions stay meaningful and alive.

5.1 Conclusion and Recommendation

5.1.1 Conclusion

This study shows that art can play an important role in preserving and sharing oral traditions. Presenting stories through exhibitions, performances, and visual installations makes them more engaging and accessible to different audiences. Working closely with storytellers and community members added depth and authenticity, while also encouraging participation and a sense of shared belonging. At the same time, the project revealed challenges, particularly in balancing creative interpretation with cultural accuracy and ensuring respectful representation. Overall, the findings suggest that art is not just a way to record stories but a means of keeping them alive and meaningful in the present.

5.1.2 Recommendation

Future oral history projects should work closely with community members, especially elders, at every stage of collecting and interpreting stories. This ensures that the accounts remain authentic and true to the people who share them. Projects should use more than just written records, like video recordings and digital platforms, so the stories can be preserved and accessed more widely. It is important to follow clear ethical guidelines, making sure participants give informed consent and that sensitive stories are represented respectfully. Educational outreach, such as workshops, can help share these narratives with the public, while incorporating stories into art forms like performance or visual art can reach even more audiences. Finally, supporting further research will allow scholars to study patterns, compare traditions, and understand how modern changes affect the preservation of these narratives.

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