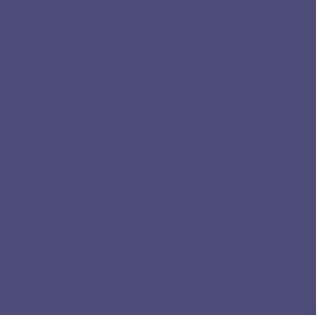
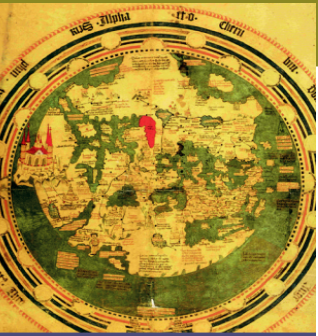


Issue 8

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 **White Rose**
College of the Arts
& Humanities
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield & York

Journal

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We would like to acknowledge and thank our peer reviewers for their time, dedication, and insightful comments. Their expertise, meticulous evaluation, and thoughtful feedback have greatly enriched the quality of the submissions. The peer reviewers for this issue include (in alphabetical order):

CLEMENTINE VANN-ALEXANDER (University of Leeds)
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SOPHIE HAYWOOD (University of Sheffield)

Editorial

We are delighted to present the eighth issue of the WRoCAH Student Journal. WRoCAH is committed to supporting high-quality research and empowering doctoral researchers to make meaningful contributions to both academia and wider society. With this commitment as our guiding principle, we have chosen “research impact” as the theme for this special issue, focussing on the wide-ranging impact of arts and humanities research.

From the outset, we received multiple expressions of interest for this issue. Despite encountering various challenges leading to a few withdrawals, we persevered and are proud to showcase two compelling submissions that explore the theme of impact across diverse arts and humanities disciplines.

Firstly, Boom explores the impact of ethnolinguistic research in Dhofar, a coastal mountain range in southern Oman. By employing participant observation and online survey methods, Boom illustrates how arts and humanities research can play a pivotal role in reversing declining health in local languages and knowledge.

Secondly, Luo provides a video essay that examines the potential impact of Chinese Kunju dance in cross-cultural contexts. Luo showcases how elements of Kunju dance corporealise landscape wisdom, promoting the well-being of individuals by cultivating inner harmony and tranquillity. A public link to the video essay is provided alongside a written transcription.

While we hope you enjoy the compelling work featured in this issue, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to all our contributors, peer reviewers, and you, our readers. It is our sincere hope that this issue will inspire you to reflect on the far-reaching impact that arts and humanities research can have beyond the confines of academia.

Jonathan Tang, James Cannon, Isabel Hedgecock, Juliet Rudman, Daisy Towers, Poonam Sharma
The WRoCAH Journal Editorial Team

Impact of Ethnolinguistic Research in Dhofar – A Case Study

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Abstract

In Dhofar (Oman) and al-Mahra (Yemen), there is a unique ecosystem due largely to annual monsoon winds from the Indian Ocean which are caught by a coastal mountain range. The endemic languages and cultures are closely linked with the local ecosystem. However, due to socioeconomic shift, rapid development, climate change, and the introduction of Arabic as the language of business and education, the link has weakened significantly, and the local languages, cultures, and ecosystems are in decline. The population of the region has been using Arabic in place of the local languages; the cultures are likewise shifting from traditional to modern lifestyles, which along with the language shift, has led to a breakdown in communication between the older and younger generations; the ecosystems have been heavily damaged by increased livestock herds, overgrazing, and urbanisation.

Recent research in this region, such as the Documentation and Ethnolinguistic Analysis of Modern South Arabian languages (DEAMSA) project, has slowed this decline through community involvement in documenting the languages and cultures. Follow-up work including the author's PhD research using and extending DEAMSA's work within the local communities have seen that impact grow.

This paper provides a case study of the impact the research has had in these regions, drawing from personal testimony of research collaborators, e-resources developed with DEAMSA material, and in collaboration with Dhofaris, a survey exploring Dhofaris' interest in the local flora, and cultural considerations on measurement of impact.

1. Introduction: A brief history of documentation work in Dhofar

In Dhofar (Oman) and al-Mahra (Yemen), a coastal mountain range catches annual monsoon winds from the Indian Ocean resulting in a cloud forest biome. Owing to geographic isolation and the unique climate,

this region is home to several endemic plants,¹ animals,² languages, and cultures.³ The indigenous languages, collectively the Modern South Arabian Languages (MSAL), are all categorised as endangered, that is, falling out of use to varying extents.⁴ The two largest MSAL are Mehri, with approximately 200,000 speakers, and Shehret with approximately 40,000 speakers.⁵ Traditionally, the Mahra (Mehri-speaking tribes) lived north of the escarpment mountains of Dhofar and al-Mahra in the arid plateau and desert. The Shehret speakers traditionally lived in the monsoon-affected mountains surrounding the Salalah plain (See Figure 1 Map of Dhofar). Today, most speakers have settled into towns and cities, the largest of which is Salalah, Oman to the south of the mountains. Though a proportion of the Mehri-speaking population lives in Yemen, data for this paper is largely taken from Oman due to ongoing conflict in Yemen.



Figure 1 Map of Dhofar

¹ Shahina A. Ghazanfar, and Martin Fisher, *Vegetation of the Arabian Peninsula* (Springer Science & Business Media, 1998); Anthony G. Miller, and Miranda Morris, *Plants of Dhofar: The Southern Region of Oman: Traditional, Economic and Medicinal Uses* (Oman: Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment, 1988).

² Janet C. E. Watson, Andrea Boom, and Abdullah Musallam al-Mahri, 'Modern South Arabian: Appraising the Language–Nature Relationship in Dhofar', in *Proceedings of the 47th Annual Meeting of the North Atlantic Conference on Afroasiatic Linguistics (NACAL 47)* (Leeds, accepted 2021).

³ Watson, Boom, al-Mahri.

Marie-Claude Simeone-Senelle. 2011. 'Modern South Arabian.' in Stefan Wening, Geogrey Khan, Michael P. Streck and Janet C.E. Watson (eds.), *The Semitic languages: An international handbook* (Walter de Gruyter GmbH: Berlin/Boston).

⁴ Janet C. E. Watson, and Abdullah Musallam al-Mahri, 'Developing Resources for Modern South Arabian Languages', in *Communicating Linguistics: Language, Community and Public Engagement*, ed. by Hazel Price and Dan McIntyre (Routledge, 2023), pp. 168-79.

⁵ Watson, al-Mahri.

Oman modernised recently and rapidly. Prior to 1970 there were two hospitals in the capital city, Muscat,⁶ few schools and a total of six miles of paved road.⁷ Today, there are thousands of miles of paved roads, modern healthcare, and schools and universities across the country. These changes largely occurred between 1970 and 2000, with development continuing to the present day.⁸

This modernisation has had enormous impact on well-being measures such as infant mortality rates which decreased 99.24% from 1972 to 2008.⁹ Socioeconomic development has also impacted the local ecosystem; as wealth and stability increased, livestock and human populations also increased, leading to significant ecological damage.¹⁰ Traditional knowledge is disappearing as the domains in which it was used have shifted. For example, traditional houses have been replaced with concrete cinderblock houses;¹¹ and traditional water sources, once necessary for survival, have been replaced by indoor plumbing.¹² In much the same way, indigenous languages are negatively impacted by these changes; as schooling, modern healthcare, and other government services were introduced, Arabic replaced local languages as the language for business, entertainment, and education.¹³

In response to this, documentation projects such as the Documentation and Ethnolinguistic Analysis of Modern South Arabian languages (DEAMSA)¹⁴ and follow-up fieldwork have focused on documenting the traditions and languages. Knowledgeable speakers of local languages were recorded describing aspects of life prior to the changes of the 1970s and 80s in their local languages. Topics include vocabulary lists, stories about memorable events, information about landscapes, wind types, and local plants. The archives from the DEAMSA project are housed in the Endangered Languages Archive

⁶ Moeness M. al-Shishtawy, 'Four Decades of Progress: Evolution of the Health System in Oman', *Sultan Qaboos University Medical Journal*, 10 (2010), 12-22.

⁷ Linda Pappas Funsch, *Oman Reborn: Balancing Tradition and Modernization* (Springer, 2015).

⁸ See for example, al-Shishtawy;

World Bank, 'GDP Per Capita (Current US\$) - Oman', World Bank Group, (2021)

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=OM> [Accessed 2 Sept 2021];

The Consulate General of the Sultanate of Oman, 'Oman's Booming Healthcare Sector' (2021) <http://oman.org.au/omans-booming-healthcare-sector/> [Accessed 2 Sept 2021].

⁹ al-Shishtawy.

¹⁰ Lawrence Ball, Douglas MacMillan, Joseph Tzanopoulos, Andrew Spalton, Hadi al-Hikmani, and Mark Moritz, 'Contemporary Pastoralism in the Dhofar Mountains of Oman', *Human Ecology*, 48 (2020), 267-77.

¹¹ Watson, Janet C. E., Andrea Boom, Amer al-Kathiri, and Miranda Morris, 'Three Shehret Texts: Building with flora.' in Fabio Gasparini, Kamala Russell and Janet C. E. Watson (eds.), *Language and Nature in Southern Arabia* (Cambridge, 2023).

¹² Saeed al-Mahri, 'Traditional water sources in Dhofar.' In *Water@Leeds* Blog.

<https://wateratleeds.wordpress.com/2015/02/18/traditional-water-sources-in-dhofar/>: (University of Leeds: 2015)

¹³ Watson and al-Mahri.

¹⁴ Janet C.E. Watson, and Miranda Morris, 'Documentation of Modern South Arabian: Mehri', in *Endangered Languages Archive* (<http://hdl.handle.net/2196/e1220e3a-459f-4565-bb7c-5a748d01ef97>: 2016);

———, 'Documentation of Modern South Arabian: Shehret', in *Endangered Languages Archive* (<http://hdl.handle.net/2196/00-0000-0000E-D5F2-1>: 2016).

(<https://www.clararchive.org/>). Collaborative research has continued in both Dhofar and al-Mahra, and the archives have been updated regularly with new materials.¹⁵

Documentation is an important first step. However, for language revitalisation to be successful, language use must be expanded to new domains.¹⁶ The changes of the past fifty years created new domains such as schools, hospitals, government agencies, and the internet. This is also true for the indigenous knowledge of the region. New domains include urban planning, biodiversity conservation, and livestock management.¹⁷ However, these domains already include the use of Arabic, therefore intentional intervention is needed to extend the local languages and traditional knowledge.

This case study examines how arts and humanities research has helped extend the use of languages and traditional knowledge. The next section discusses data-gathering methodologies, [Section 3](#) provides results and analysis, [Section 4](#) suggests future projects, and the conclusions are presented in [Section 5](#).

2. Methodology

Two methodologies were employed and are discussed in the following sections: first, participant observation and second, an online survey. Participant observation demonstrated the impact of ethnographic research, and the online survey provided an opportunity to pursue more specific questions about previous research and participants' interest in future projects.

Participant observation

Participant observation is a methodology in which the researcher observes and participates in lived experiences of a social group.¹⁸ This experience is recorded in a field journal which is then used in the analysis of the observations.¹⁹ Participant observation data were gathered in Dhofar over several field visits, online collaborations for webinar sessions and conferences, and personal connections via Zoom and WhatsApp. The findings from this method are described in [Section 3](#).

¹⁵ Watson and Morris;

¹⁶ Adam Stone, and Erik Anonby, 'Cybercartography in Indigenous Language Education', in *Further Developments in the Theory and Practice of Cybercartography: International Dimensions and Language Mapping*, ed. by DR Fraser Taylor, Erik Anonby and Kumiko Murasugi (Elsevier, 2019), pp. 441-60.

¹⁷ Andrea Boom, 'Small, Green and Prickly: Local Botanical Knowledge in Modern South Arabian Languages', in *34th Deutscher Orientalistentag* (Freie Universitat Berlin: 2022).

¹⁸ Fiona Copland, and Angela Creese, 'Data in Linguistic Ethnography', in *Linguistic Ethnography: Collecting, Analysing and Presenting Data*, ed. by Fiona Copland and Angela Creese (55 City Road, London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2015).

¹⁹ Uta Papen, 'Participant Observation and Field Notes', in *The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Ethnography*, ed. by Karin Tusting (Routledge, 2019), pp. 141-53.

Survey

In addition to participant observation, a survey measuring the impact of research outputs was conducted from 22 November to 10 December 2022. It was sent to nine personal contacts in Oman and shared through a WhatsApp group of 65 researchers working on language and nature among MSAL from around the world, approximately 15 of which are Dhofari. Ethical approval (FAHC 21-008) was granted on 1 October 2021 through the University of Leeds Ethics Committee. The survey included a standard privacy policy, and excluded people aged 0-17.

The survey was constructed around a story map built using the ArcGIS online StoryMap tool (<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/>). The story map is based on information about local plant names and uses in skin care, and is available in English (<https://arcg.is/0XSWPH>) and Arabic (<https://arcg.is/S0XWL>). It was written with Kamela al-Barami and translated into Arabic by Hammal al-Balushi.

The survey was divided into four sections: the first section gathered demographic information; the second section evaluated participants' botanical knowledge and their involvement in botanical use and conservation; following this, the survey includes a story map, and closes with questions about participants' future plans related to use and conservation. The justifications and goals of each survey section are outlined below.

Demographics

Participants' age, gender, location, tribal affiliation, and language use were collected in the demographic section. This information was compared against participants' knowledge and conservation participation. It was also used to exclude participants who were underaged or not from southern Arabia.

The survey was available in Arabic and English which provided greater accessibility for people in Dhofar, as Arabic is used more than English. Translating the survey into Mehri and Shehret was considered, but ultimately, this would not have expanded the scope enough to warrant the effort. This is because the population that does not know Arabic well enough to complete the survey cannot read it well enough to complete the survey in Mehri or Shehret. Unfortunately, this meant older, monolingual MSAL speakers were excluded from the survey. In the future, the survey will be run in-person in Mehri and Shehret to include these speakers.

The rapid development that has occurred since the ascension to power of Qaboos bin Said (1970) and the end of the Dhofar War (1963-1975)²⁰ has led to dramatically different upbringing experiences for young Dhofaris. As such, the survey asked participants which of the following age ranges they fall into:

- 85+ (born before 1937) – These participants would have memory of the pre-Qaboos era and most came of age within the subsistence lifestyles of their ancestors.
- 56-84 (b. 1938-1966) – These participants were children when Qaboos became sultan and were born into subsistence lifestyles. They are expected to have a high degree of ecological knowledge and less formal education.
- 41-55 (b. 1967-1981) – These participants grew up in a rapidly changing environment. They would have learned some survival skills from their parents, who had been dependent on the ecosystem. Arabic education was increasingly common during this period but reportedly not high quality.
- 25-40 (b. 1982-1997) – These participants experienced socioeconomic change during their childhood. Those from nomadic families were either born in a town or moved to a town or city as children. Most of this generation have some formal education in Arabic.
- 18-25 (b. 1998-2004) – Dhofaris in this age group were born after most of the change had taken place; most families had settled in towns or cities where schooling and healthcare are available.
- 0-17 (b. 2005-2022) – any respondent born between 2005 and 2022 was automatically excluded and provided a link to view the story map. This was done to safeguard vulnerable sectors, as at the time of the survey, these people were under 18.

Following this, participants were asked about their comprehension and frequency of use of Mehri and Shehret. Both languages are in danger of falling out of use²¹ which could result in the loss of local knowledge.²² By measuring the frequency of language use, we can better target revitalisation efforts. Demographic information was collected to compare against the participants' knowledge and use of local flora.

Botanical knowledge, conservation, and use

Following the demographic section, the survey asked participants to identify three common Dhofari plants from photographs. The goal was to determine the baseline knowledge prior to viewing the story map which identified the plants in question. Plants were chosen for their usefulness, habitat, and prevalence. All three are used in skincare; each plant comes from a different biome in Dhofar, the coastal plain, the mountains, and the plateau north of the mountains, these plants are recognisable by most people with knowledge of the local flora.

²⁰ Watson and al-Mahri.

²¹ Watson and al-Mahri.

²² Rodrigo Cámara-Leret, and Jordi Bascompte, 'Language Extinction Triggers the Loss of Unique Medicinal Knowledge', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118 (2021).

Further questions set a baseline for the participants' use of local flora for food and medicine, and their participation in conservation efforts. These results were compared with the demographic profiles to determine who is using and conserving the local flora. In turn, this directs future targets for involving wider participation from the community. These results were also compared with the information collected following the story map to measure its impact.

Story map

At this stage in the survey there was an embedded version of the story map.

Follow-up

The follow-up section measured the attitude change toward using and conserving local flora after learning some traditional uses. This was done through a series of questions relating to participants' intention to conserve and/or extend the use of the local flora. These results were compared to baseline information about conservation and use to measure the impact of making information about the plants accessible.

Participants could then provide contact information to be notified when other e-resources are published, other surveys are available, and to volunteer to help build more e-resources. The contact information was held in a separate location to protect participants' identities. The survey results show an interest in the local flora, its use, and conservation.

3. Results

Arts and humanities research has begun to reverse declining health in local languages and knowledge. Findings from participant observation and online surveys demonstrate this.

Participant observation

Analysis of the participant observation data examined whether there is interest in the history and tradition of the region and whether language and knowledge use are expanding into new domains. Evidence of interest in history, tradition, and new domains for language use was found. New domains for knowledge applications are lacking in evidence.

Renewed interest in history and tradition

The impact documentation projects have had in Dhofar is visible in the younger generation joining the research because of a renewed interest in their parents' history. This is observed first through conversations that precede the recording of stories or information for the archive. While recording for this research, the entire family gathered to listen to the conversation and add information as they were

able. This allows younger speakers (under 25) to participate, even if they do not know enough information to make a recording themselves.

Second, some younger speakers (under 25) continued the documentation by recording or writing about their older relatives' histories. This is possible, in part, because the DEAMSA project provided some recording instruments available for use in Oman and training on how to prepare recordings for archiving.²³ Recordings by local researchers are valuable because Dhofaris can document topics of interest to them.

Documentation work done prior to DEAMSA has also inspired renewed interest in the history and tradition of the area. For example, documentation for the book 'Plants of Dhofar'²⁴ continues to have an impact today. Today, one of my main Dhofari collaborators is the son of one of the consultants involved in the book. He has continued to research the traditions and lifestyles of his parents' generation and has begun working on his own book on traditional beautification practices, to be published later this year.

The rich history and traditions of Dhofar are still valued by the younger generation. Arts and humanities research has provided them with a new avenue for learning these traditions and history. The next section describes how arts and humanities research similarly affects language use.

Expanded domains for language use

Languages which are falling out of use are described as endangered. When the everyday domains of language use change or disappear, it becomes endangered unless it expanded to new domains.²⁵

The DEAMSA project developed an Arabic-based orthography for the MSAL allowing them to expand into domains which require writing. The online messaging app, WhatsApp, has been a natural domain for using the new orthography because it is easily accessible and widely used. For example, Professor Watson regularly uses WhatsApp to text in local languages with her Dhofari contacts. Another new domain where the written languages are used is in children's books found online here:

<https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/modern-south-arabian-languages/doc/resources-2>.

Another extended domain for language use is teaching outsiders the languages. Professor Watson has run language courses with a Dhofari colleague for four years. This interest in the languages and outsiders

²³ Watson and Morris.

²⁴ Miller.

²⁵ Stone.

using them has increased their perceived value in the region. When Professor Watson meets new people and speaks the local language with them, there is often excitement that a foreigner can speak the language.

A third new domain is on social media, such as X (formerly Twitter) and YouTube. There are X users who post in Mehri and others who post about Mehri. There are also growing a number of videos of traditional songs, poems, and chants in Mehri online. Shehret is less represented on social media.

These new domains for language use remain limited. This adaptation provides hope for the languages' continued use, but further expansion is needed. The DEAMSA project has made these domains possible through the new orthography and valuing traditions and history by recording them. Next steps for expanding language use into more domains are discussed in [Section 4](#).

Expanded domains for knowledge use

Interest in local knowledge in Dhofar appears to be growing as demonstrated above in the section on [renewed interest in history and tradition](#) and in the [survey results](#) below. However, new domains for applying this knowledge are currently not in evidence. [Section 4](#) will discuss some possible domains and strategies for expansion.

Survey results

This section describes the survey data. The first section introduces the participants, the second section describes their knowledge, conservation, and use of the local flora; while the final section describes the impact as seen through future intentions to expand the use and conservation of local flora and engage with future e-resources.

Participants

The ten participants represented geographic diversity and diversity in the languages spoken at home. There is a heavy gender imbalance and the age spread is not very wide. Two participants were excluded from the results because they were in Saudi Arabia, one was American, and neither spoke MSAL leaving eight participants in the results presented here. There were fewer participants than envisioned when the survey was set up, but the results offer insight into the impact of research in the region.

Two participants gave their age range as 41-55 when completing the survey, the rest were born between 1982 and 1997, aged 25-40. The 25-40 years olds tend to have stronger technology and literacy skills which could have been a barrier for older participants. The two respondents over the age of 40 are new contacts and one is from a tribal group that has not yet been involved with DEAMSA or follow-up fieldwork.

Seven participants were men and one was a woman. Most of the researchers in the WhatsApp group and my personal contacts were men, which could partly account for this disparity. The female respondent had similar answers to the other participants in her age group, however, she was the only respondent to decline participation in future surveys or creating other e-resources which, along with her being the only female participant, could indicate that women are less inclined to participate in this type of survey.

All participants included in the study live in Dhofar. The regions represented are on the coastal plain, on the plateaus north of the mountains, and in the coastal mountains of western Dhofar. These locations encompass many of the biomes in the region (see Figure 1 Map of Dhofar).

Every participant reported comprehension in both Mehri and Shehret. Both languages are widely spoken in the regions represented which could account for this result. Six participants spoke Mehri at home, and three Shehret; one household was bilingual. The greater number of Mehri speakers could be attributed to the higher population of Mehri speakers.

Only one household used both languages at home even though each respondent reported an understanding of both languages. This is a pattern that is found more widely. One of our consultants, who did not participate in the survey, is a Mehri speaker who spends time each evening with her neighbours who speak Shehret. She understands most of the conversations, but does not speak Shehret herself. Conversely, there was a visitor of a Mehri speaking household who only spoke Shehret and Arabic herself. However, this pattern of bi- or multi-lingualism is not universal. Further away from the main city and in the diaspora, it is more common for people only to understand one MSAL.

Initial botanical knowledge

Age played a role in the participants' botanical knowledge, as anticipated. The two older participants labelled all three plants successfully, compared to one of the six younger participants. Botanical knowledge appears to be stronger in Dhofaris born while reliance on the environment was still necessary. Only one participant, a Shehret speaker between the age of 25 and 40, did not label any of the plants; the rest of the participants knew at least one of the three.

Conservation participation

In the next section, participants were asked how often in the past year they had participated in ecological conservation efforts and were then asked whether they wanted to increase their involvement in conservation after viewing the story map.

Conservation participation appears to be linked to botanical knowledge. The three participants who were not already involved in conservation efforts, were also least able to label the plants in the earlier section. These three participants indicated that they would like to increase their participation in conservation following reading the botanical information in the story map, suggesting that increasing knowledge could also increase their willingness to join conservation efforts.

Five participants were already involved in conservation. This indicates that there is concern for the local ecosystem and an awareness of declining ecological health. Further evidence for this is found in the fact that the new contacts were already involved in conservation, so the result is not entirely accounted for by my personal contacts already being involved in this type of work.

There are concerns about the local ecosystem. All eight participants indicated that they were interested in increasing their involvement with conservation projects. One participant indicated that they had a project in mind that they wanted to start, demonstrating innovation within the community. Two other participants indicated that they would participate if others were joined. Community action is important for these projects, both in terms of drawing more people in and in terms of the overall success.

Conservation was a high priority for these participants which could indicate a pattern in the wider community. In addition, interest in conservation increased when knowledge of the flora was accessed.

Use of local flora for food

Most participants in this survey had used local plants for food at least once in the past year. Even younger participants who grew up without relying on the local ecosystem for survival used the flora for food. Following the story map, four participants indicated that they were interested in using local plants for food more often. One of these four indicated that they wanted someone to show them the plants and how to use them. Other consultants have expressed this as well outside of the survey; one consultant said to me in relation to this topic, 'I wish my parents would take me to the desert and show me what the plants are and tell me their names.' This is how this information was passed down for centuries, but as life shifted away from reliance on ecosystems, the context in which the younger generations learned has disappeared. This desire to know more shows that ecosystems are still valued by the population, even the younger generation.

Use of local flora for medicine

Six respondents reported that they had used plants for medicine at least once in the past year. Following the story map, six participants indicated that they were interested in increasing their use of local plants for

medicine but wanted more information. This again shows the value of traditions and the ecosystem but also highlights the difficulty in accessing the necessary information.

There are other sources of medical care today; modern healthcare is commonplace, even in some of the smaller villages. However, the care provided is often reactive rather than preventative. Primary care doctors are not commonplace, so health check-ups and general health monitoring are not available. Additionally, health professionals can be dismissive. For example, during fieldwork, my friend's nine-month-old daughter had difficulty breathing; so we took her to a nearby hospital. The triage nurses there dismissed the mother's concerns and told her that it was probably a birth defect. We also tried a medical clinic where the doctor was unable or unwilling to provide advice. Eventually, we returned home with no care strategy, next steps, or treatment. The mother used aloe (a plant indigenous to the region) on the baby's face and chest and her breathing improved significantly in the next couple of days. While healthcare is available and can treat many health problems, home treatments are sometimes still more accessible.

Follow-up and next steps

At the end of the survey, participants were asked whether they were interested in collaborating to develop more e-resources. Three people said yes. One was a Shehret speaker who did not identify any of the plants earlier in the survey. This is another way that the impact is evident in the region: having access to a small amount of information can build curiosity and interest in learning and applying more information.

People in the region valued the information that was accessible. A high proportion of respondents were interested in knowing about further work being done: six were interested in participating in future surveys, and seven wanted to be notified when new e-resources were published. Even though this survey did not draw many participants, those who participated were concerned about the ecosystem and were interested in making more information about it accessible to others.

Conclusion

The survey results demonstrate that the ecosystem is valued by the population, even the younger generation (under 25), but information about it is difficult to access. Making information available increased the willingness of respondents to participate in conservation in the future. In addition, the participant observation results showed that the rich history and tradition of Dhofar are still valued by the younger generation. Documentation projects in Dhofar renew interest in history and tradition and provide new ways for the younger generation of access that information. New ways of learning are necessary because traditional domains have disappeared.

The next section describes and outlines future directions for making traditional knowledge more accessible, and expanding languages and knowledge into new domains to encourage sustainability.

4. Future work

Knowledge accessibility

Further surveys and interviews will be conducted to target revitalisation in a way that is both culturally appropriate and accessible to the population. Greater geographic and age-group representation would be helpful. Further, women are underrepresented and appear less willing to participate in surveys; therefore, new strategies for connecting with women will be necessary. As such, the next step is to conduct interviews in person and in one of the MSAL, hopefully drawing in more women as well as older generations with lower literacy rates. As connections grow in the region, particularly with Yemeni Mehri speakers, running the survey a second time could help expand geographic representation.

I will continue to support the younger generation who are interested in documenting and describing the history and tradition of the region. One way this has already been implemented is through co-authoring presentations and journal articles with young Dhofari researchers. This gives them exposure and confidence in presenting their knowledge in academic settings. This enriches both their presence and voice in academia, and their communication of their history and identity. Some of these young researchers are now publishing independently. I will continue collaborating with the hope that one day the publications about Dhofar are written in Dhofar by Dhofaris.

The survey demonstrated that there is interest among younger speakers in history and tradition. There is also innovative thinking, with new ideas for conservation projects and books being produced. There are also suggestions from this generation regarding topics of further interest which will be the basis for new e-resources to be constructed in the future.

I will continue to work with and engage those who indicated interest in the work of making knowledge accessible. This group of interested individuals will continue to be updated on new publications and will be collaborators on new material. These resources will be published with open access so that the community can benefit from them.

Sustainability

The languages must be extended into more domains to be sustained. Some possible new domains include school curriculum and government services. There are examples of mother-tongue curriculum in sub-Saharan Africa, such as Mali, where the first two years of primary education are taught exclusively in the mother tongue when children are taught the basics of literacy and numeracy. In the third and fourth years

of school they transition to being taught exclusively in the trade language by the fifth year.²⁶ This approach led to fewer dropouts and increased pass rate and speed for students in schools that practice this pedagogy.²⁷ Other countries, such as Canada and Wales, have implemented language and culture curriculum in higher education settings.²⁸ Both of these curriculum strategies have had an impact on the resilience of the local languages and on the well-being of children who are balancing cultures – their parents' and the mainstream culture around them.²⁹

Similarly, multilingual government services are offered in many places around the world. The Canadian government operates entirely in French and English throughout the country. However, in the far north, territorial government services are available in many Indigenous languages. The Northwest Territories has 11 official languages, nine of which are Indigenous.³⁰

The local knowledge must also be expanded into new domains. Botanical knowledge has the potential to impact new domains such as urban planning, biodiversity conservation, and livestock management. All these domains could benefit from knowing the uses and value of the plants in the diverse areas of Dhofar. Since much of the local knowledge is held in the local languages, expanding the domains in which the knowledge is applied will also help revitalise the languages. At the same time, since this knowledge allowed the human population in this region to live sustainably for centuries, it also has the potential to improve the ecological health of the region, even assuming an increased use of the local flora.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, interest in the history and traditions of the region is being revitalised by arts and humanities research. People are interested in conservation, learning more about the local flora, and making traditional knowledge accessible to younger generations.

These languages have new domains into which they are spreading such as text messaging, children's stories, and YouTube videos. Archived materials are also being used to create e-resources including the languages and traditional knowledge. These domains are not central to daily life, however, and a greater expansion into daily domains is needed.

²⁶ Penelope A Bender, 'Pedagogic Convergente (Convergent Pedagogy): Using Participant Perspectives to Understand the Potential of Education Reform in Primary School Classrooms in Mali' (Michigan State University, 2006), p. 456.

²⁷ Maggie Canvin, 'Language and Education in Mali: A Consideration of Two Approaches' (University of Reading, 2015).

²⁸ W. Gwyn Lewis, 'Current Challenges in Bilingual Education in Wales', *AILA Review*, 21 (2008), 69-86; Stone.

²⁹ Stone.

³⁰ 'Official Languages Map', Office of the Northwest Territories Official Languages Commissioner, (2023) <https://olc-nt.ca/resources/official-languages-map/> [Accessed 28 May 2023].

There is interest in traditional knowledge but little evidence that it is expanding. Intentional work is needed to integrate knowledge into new domains such as urban planning, livestock management, and biodiversity conservation. Since local knowledge is intrinsically linked with the local ecosystem, making it more accessible should also improve local ecological health.

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Impact Exploration of Chinese Kunju Dance Research in Cross-Cultural Contexts – From an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract

The video's discussion draws from my PhD research, which examines the connection between Kunju dance and Chinese landscape aesthetics. My research integrates ecology, philosophy, poetics, art history, dance practice and history. The aim is to establish the spiritual and aesthetic foundation of Kunju dance and to reshape the philosophical framework in contemporary cross-cultural contexts.

Video Link: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1hsDuFFD1x7JfVzu1bsExHAbujh6UMV_8/view?usp=sharing

This is a video essay. A transcription is provided below. To play the video, please click on the link above. If you have trouble playing the video, please let us know via journal@wrocah.ac.uk

Video Transcript

Kunju dance is a dance form from Chinese Kunju (昆剧), also known as “Kunqu Opera (昆曲)”, which dominated the Chinese theatre for more than 200 years from the 16th to the 18th century. Kunju is still performed in current Chinese theatre and seen as “the ancestor of one hundred types of Chinese Opera.”¹

One important reason why Kunju is considered as a performing paradigm is due to its dance characteristics. Dance is an integral element in Kunju performance and is deployed over every minute of a play.

¹ Chunyan Hu, *Zhongguo Xiqu Shiwujiang 中国戏曲十五讲 [Fifteen Talks about Chinese Xiqu]* (Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press, 2012), p. 102.

Just as the saying goes: “In Kunju, there is no song that is not with dancing, only dance without singing”;² and “there is no sound that is not singing, and no move that is not dancing.”^{3,4}

The concern of the impact topic in this video is: is Kunju dance only to be presented as a cultural spectacle in theatres? Is the study of this genre only to be placed in museums or on the shelves of libraries? Could the research make some impact beyond academia and play a role in addressing contemporary social and cultural issues?

Based on the findings of my research, Kunju dance is profoundly informed by Chinese landscape aesthetics, as they were both deeply rooted in the literati culture. If we perceive Kunju dance as a bodily expression of landscape aesthetics, it is therefore possible to gain an insight into the aforementioned questions by studying the ancient wisdom in landscape aesthetics.

The Ecological Wisdom in Chinese Landscape Aesthetics

The term “literati” was “introduced into English in 1624 by Robert Burton to refer to the literate class in China.”⁵ This concept was closely related to “shi (士)” in the Confucian literature around the 6th century BCE⁶, which is a general term for ‘intellectuals’ or ‘scholar-officials’ in ancient Chinese society.

However, due to the historical evolution of this concept, by the time it was introduced into English during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), it specifically denoted individuals with a high level of literary and artistic cultivation among intellectuals, particularly those well-versed in “poetry and calligraphy.”⁷

“Chinese landscape aesthetics” is a concept that resides at the core of the literati culture. It is expressed through poetry, painting, gardens and other art forms, incorporating ancient people’s discovery and appreciation of natural beauty and representing a philosophical pursuit.

² Chuanying Zhou and Di Luo, *Kunju Shengya Liushinian 昆曲生涯六十年 [Sixty-years of Performing Kun Opera]* (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1988), p. 131.

³ Rushan Qi, *Qi Rushan Huiyilu 齐如山回忆录 [Memoirs of Qi Rushan]* (Shenyang: Liaoning Education Press, 2005), p. 101.

⁴ In this sense, the concept “Kunju dance” in this topic could refer to all physical movements by performers in Kunju, and can be used interchangeably with “Kunju movement”.

⁵ Dinah Birch and Katy Hooper, eds, *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* (2012), *Oxford Reference* <https://www.oxfordreference.com/> [Accessed 18 June, 2023].

⁶ Lan Jiang, *Chanxue yu Songyuan Wenrenhua 禅学与宋元文人画 [Chan Buddhism and the Literati Paintings of the Song and Yuan Dynasties]* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House, 2019), p. 63.

⁷ Fuguan Xu, *Zhongguo Yishu Jingshen 中国艺术精神 [Spirit of Chinese Art]* (Shenyang: Liaoning People’s Publishing House, 2019), p. 368.

When you are standing in front of a landscape painting or reading a landscape poem, you will be impressed by the profound unity between humans and nature depicted in the works.

In the landscape tradition, individuals never hold themselves apart from the rest of animate nature; instead, they convey a sense of belonging and deep attunement to their natural surroundings.

A poem written by a Tang-dynasty poet Wang Bo, for example:⁸

In the Mountains

--by Wang Bo

The Long River grieves over my long stay,
For my home is a thousand miles away.
Now blows the evening wind so high,
From mountain to mountain yellow leaves fly.

The human emotions are often evoked by the natural scenery; meanwhile, those natural existences seem laden with expressive intention earnestly engaging in the world as we humans do.

This great reverence for nature and its living beings can be traced back to Zhuangzi, whose philosophy attaches great importance to “the integration between human and nature.”⁹ He remarked: “Heaven and earth and I came into existence together, and all things with me are one.”^{10,11}

Zhuangzi’s thoughts had deeply and extensively affected the literati from the third century onwards, inspiring and triggering the creation of landscape poetry and painting.¹² This is evident in the case of Zong Bing (宗炳, 375-443), who is considered to be the originator of landscape painting. He justified the beauty of nature in his theoretical work,¹³ which was based on Taoist and Buddhist thoughts. He

⁸ Translated by Xu Yuanchong (Xu, 2021, p. 289). The original text: “长江悲已滞·万里念将归·况属高风晚·山山黄叶飞”.

⁹ Fuguan Xu, p. 181.

¹⁰ Youlan Feng, *Chuang-Tzu: A New Selected Translation with an Exposition of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang* (Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2012), p. 31.

¹¹ The original text: “天地与我并生·而万物与我为一”.

¹² Fuguan Xu, p. 113.

¹³ *The Preface to Painting Landscapes*, which is regarded as the declaration of the independence of landscape painting and the first treatise on landscape painting (Fuguan Xu, p.189).

proposed that viewing landscapes is a process of “cleansing and purifying the mind in order to have an insight into Tao.”^{14,15}

Due to this understanding of nature and mind, the activity of being in nature was seen as a pathway to cultivate one’s mental well-being. Thus, the literati artists became vibrant recipients of nature’s infinite gifts. Through wandering amongst the mountains and rivers, they achieved a profound inner tranquility, and a high degree of spiritual freedom.

We can experience this spiritual nourishment by reading a poem by a Ming dynasty literati Shen Zhou (1427-1509), which he inscribed in one of his landscape paintings:¹⁶

The green hills and blue streams,
where people and autumn rest, mirrored in stillness.
The vacant pavilion conceals white clouds,
while a wild crane reads the tranquil path.

This kind of poetic and creative engagement with the world in a reverential manner, reminds us of the concept of “dwelling” (or “Being-in-the-world”) developed by Martin Heidegger,¹⁷ who held dwelling is not simply a physical act of residing in a particular place but an attunement to the world.¹⁸

Why does attunement matter? For Heidegger, ‘being’ represents a rich, multifaceted existence, overflowed with meaning and potential.¹⁹ Beings, while always somewhat concealed, reveal themselves differently depending on our attunement.²⁰ Attunement means letting nature be what it will, without attempting to modify it.²¹ Notably, artists, by being in tune with the world, present a sacred vision to illuminate the

¹⁴ Lang Ye, *Zhongguo Meixueshi Dagang 中国美学史大纲 [The Outline of Chinese Aesthetic History]* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 1985), p. 209.

¹⁵ The original text: “澄怀观道”.

¹⁶ The original text: “青山间碧溪·人静秋亦静。虚亭藏白云·野鹤读幽径”.

¹⁷ There has been a considerable and complex discussion on how Heidegger’s association with Nazism affected his philosophical framework. The publication of Heidegger’s Black Notebooks in 2014 exposed a significant overlap between his philosophy and Nazism, despite the efforts of Heidegger’s supporters to separate his political views from his philosophical doctrines (Wolin, 2023). It is crucial to acknowledge that Heidegger’s affiliation with Nazism undoubtedly had an impact on his philosophical outlook. However, it is pertinent to note that this influence has no bearing on the core argument of this work.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, ‘Building, Dwelling and Thinking’, in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 343-364.

¹⁹ Tony Lack, *Re-enchanting the World: Martin Heidegger on Art, Technology and Ecology* (Word Wise, 2013), Amazon Kindle e-book, p. 948.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1098.

implicit assumptions about the world's meaning. In this way, they help people embrace a more authentic way of dwelling.²²

However, in the modern technological age, human beings have become increasingly disconnected from their surroundings and lost touch with their meaning.

Thus, Heidegger emphasised the importance of dwelling as a way to open up our understanding of being, and to reconnect with the world in a more authentic way.

He called us to move away from a purely instrumental and exploitative relationship with the world and to cultivate a more contemplative and appreciative attitude.²³

It is fascinating to observe that, despite being separated by centuries, a profound resonance exists between the philosophical ideas of Heidegger and Chinese landscape thoughts, and these thoughts were put into practice by the literati in both their life and arts.

The Embodied Wisdom

The most typical art forms chosen by the ancient literati to express their thoughts were poetry, calligraphy and painting, using the languages composed of lines, colors, rhythms and sounds, which can all be considered as expressions of nature.

As David Abram stated: “the power of language remains, first and foremost, a way of singing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos.”²⁴

Thus, if all art forms are regarded as a language, then as much as any of these arts developed in the literati culture background, the body language of Kunju dance is capable of communicating the ancient Chinese concept of how man and nature interact.

²² *Ibid.*, p.948.

²³ Martin Heidegger, ‘The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays’, in *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), pp. 307-342.

²⁴ David Abram, *Becoming Animal: an Earthly Cosmology* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 11.

What's more, the possibility of expressing the wisdom of the landscape tradition through Kunju movement lies within its own features. By these features, the dancer could “sing” themselves in to contact with nature, which can be observed in the following dimensions.

1. Breathing and connecting

In the practice of Kunju dance, there is a tradition of emphasising breathing,²⁵ which embodies the rhythms of the universe. Through giving enough attention to the breath, a profound connection with nature is established, almost like unlocking a secret code for communication with the world around us.

The air that ceaselessly slips through our nostrils and throats, infusing vitality into our blood and hearts, can also sweep away autumn leaves, ripple the surface of a river, and quietly pass through the wings of a soaring bird.

Focusing on the breath beneath our noses and observing the subtle changes it imparts to our body's movements, we become aware of the ceaseless transformations that the invisible air brings to nature. This process guides us from the realm of the finite to the infinite.

Breathing serves as a reminder that the cosmos is boundless in its expanse, similar to how clouds and mist permeate mountains in landscape paintings or how blank areas in these works signify the water. These components give a small picture of the illusion of endless spatial depth.

2. Circling and flowing

In Kunju movements, circles are prevalent throughout.²⁶ The waist serves as the central hub, generating circular movements in various planes. These circles extend to the hands, arms, legs, feet, and even include the circular motions of the head and eyes.

The circular momentum in Kunju dance is as fluid as the dynamic seen in calligraphic strokes.

Additionally, it perfectly depicts the concept of the “moving perspective” found in landscape paintings, where the painters combine various points of view into a single frame, just as one's body wanders through the scenery, creating a dynamic and ever-changing experience.

²⁵ Zuqian Su, *Xiqu Wdiao Meixue Libun Ziliao 戏曲舞蹈美学资料 [Xiqu Dance Aesthetic Theory Materials]* (Wuhan: Wuhan Branch of China Dancers Association, 1980), pp. 104-107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

The trajectory of the circular movement symbolises not a fixed point or state, but rather a gradually unfolding process, a fluid presence. The path of the circle portrays a space in a continuous flow through time, merging the separate concepts of space and time into a unified whole.

3. Experiencing and embodying

Kunju dance embodies the seamless integration of the inner experience and the external embodiment of surrounding environment.²⁷ On its traditional stage, where elaborate settings are absent to demonstrate various scenes, performers adeptly employ their movements to evoke and convey the atmospheric essence of the surroundings. For example, traversing extensive distances on horseback; or navigating currents of the rivers.

The lyrics themselves were usually written as landscape verses, where the human mind mirrors the beauty of nature. The performers' movements must harmonise with the rhythm of the chanting, slowly depicting the transformations of the surroundings through their physical expressions.

Is the world subjective or objective? Is man the centre of nature? Or nature the centre of man? When we are confronted with these questions, Kunju dance's practice, which unites the inner and outer worlds, can offer us a new model of thinking. Beyond observing the world through a rational, scientific, and utilitarian lens,²⁸ we can also truly feel and experience the world by immersing ourselves in it, with our minds and bodies integrated.

When the boundaries between subject and object dissolve, the world we inhabit naturally reveals its intrinsic meaning. This perspective presents a potential pathway that leads us towards Heidegger's ideal of "dwelling".

²⁷ Youhan Chen, *Xiqu Biaoyan Meixue Tansuo 戏曲表演美学探索 [Exploration of Xiqu Performance Aesthetics]* (Beijing: China Theater Press, 1985).

²⁸ From the lens of utilitarianism, the sole criterion for determining right and wrong is the consequences of an action. It distinguishes moral value based on outcomes (West and Duignan, 2023), rather than the experiential process. This view asserts that the morality of an action is determined by its ability to enhance happiness or pleasure (West and Duignan, 2023), yet it may not fully account for the subjective nature of happiness, which can vary from person to person.

Practice-test through workshop

Based on the above understanding, I utilise practical workshops to explore the connection between Kunju dance and landscape arts, aiming to identify their shared eco-philosophical foundation. There are three primary units.

1. Pre-expressive level

Drawing on theatre director Eugenio Barba's theory of Pre-expressivity,²⁹ this section focuses on the fundamental principles and elements of Kunju dance. These include attention to breathing, the utilisation of the waist, and the reciprocal coordination among the torso, arms, hands, eyes and steps. The purpose of this section is to delve into the ecological dimension embedded within the movement, specifically focusing on how Kunju movement itself can facilitate a connection with nature.

2. Expressive level

This section looks at how Kunju dance elements can be used to convey the natural imageries present in Chinese poetry, calligraphy, and painting. The intention is to investigate whether Kunju dance can effectively represent the ecological ideals found in the landscape tradition. Here are some cases of how dance and landscape arts have been combined:

Dance and poetry: Focuses on how the dance movements harmonise with the sound and rhythm of the poem.

Dance and calligraphy: Focuses on how dance movements present the lines and textures of calligraphic strokes.

Dance and painting: Focuses on how dance movements embody the time, space, and perspectives in painting.

3. Experimenting level

This part is based on theoretical studies of landscape aesthetics, using elements from poetry, calligraphy, painting and aesthetic theories to inspire physical improvisation. Set within a cross-cultural context, this section encourages participants from diverse backgrounds of bodily practice and cultures to experiment and engage in discussions. The objective is to investigate how Kunju dance might be incorporated into contemporary contexts in both China and the West, in an inclusive and open manner.

By examining the three units, we can explore various ways in which Kunju movement corporealises landscape wisdom. By embracing this corporeality, it provides a means for modern individuals to restore

²⁹ Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: the Secret Art of the Performer* (Routledge in association with Centre for Performance Research, 1991), pp. 186-204.

the bond between human and nature, between body and mind. This is particularly crucial in the present post-pandemic era, marked by an excessive focus on technology and a sedentary reliance on computer screens.

In this way, this ancient art form classified as intangible cultural heritage,³⁰ can be revitalised as an eco-somatic practice promoting the well-being of modern individuals. The purpose of this dance practice extends beyond the stage and winning applause; it aims to cultivate inner harmony and tranquility within individuals themselves. This is precisely where this study of Kunju dance makes its potential impact.

³⁰ Kunqu opera has been listed as one of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2001.

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