

Mapping and recording place-based oral histories: a methodology



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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Preface | 4 |
| Oral histories: an ACT initiative..... | 5 |
| I. What is place-based oral history? | 7 |
| Oral histories in non-Western contexts..... | 9 |
| About this guide..... | 11 |
| II. ACT's participatory place-based oral history documentation methodology | 12 |
| A. Identifying local partners, defining roles, and establishing FPIC..... | 13 |
| B. Assembling and training the project team; obtaining equipment..... | 15 |
| C. Participatory mapping of the community's territory..... | 16 |
| D. Conducting and recording oral history interviews..... | 17 |
| E. Designing the digital map; processing media recordings..... | 20 |
| F. Building Terrastories for the community..... | 21 |
| G. Validating data, stories, and permissions..... | 22 |
| H. Installing Terrastories and final preparations..... | 23 |
| III. Selecting recording equipment | 25 |
| Tips for selecting an optimal kit for your project..... | 25 |
| Sample kit 1: Matawai oral histories..... | 26 |
| Sample kit 2: Kogui oral histories..... | 29 |
| IV. Best practices for recording in the field | 31 |
| Picking a location & background, and setting up the shot..... | 31 |
| Setting up the equipment..... | 33 |
| Preparing the interview subject(s)..... | 34 |
| Things to keep in mind while recording..... | 34 |
| What to do after the interview..... | 35 |
| Storing and handling media files in the field..... | 36 |
| Taking care of equipment in the field..... | 36 |
| V. Using the Terrastories geostorytelling application | 37 |
| How Terrastories works..... | 37 |
| Setting up and installing Terrastories..... | 38 |
| Hardware for hosting Terrastories..... | 38 |
| VI. Other methodologies and resources | 39 |
| Tools..... | 39 |
| Methodologies..... | 40 |
| Other projects and initiatives..... | 40 |
| Written resources..... | 42 |
| VII. Glossary | 42 |
| Case studies | 43 |
| Case study 1: Matawai 'first-time' ancestral knowledge in Suriname..... | 43 |
| Case study 2: Kogui sacred sites and the 'linea negra' in Colombia..... | 46 |
| Case study 3: Waura spiritual landscapes in the Xingu, Brazil..... | 47 |

Preface

The setting is Boslanti, a Matawai village along the upper Saramacca River region of Suriname. It's a dry, sunny Amazonian afternoon. An Amazon Conservation Team (ACT) geographer sits down with Dora Flink, an elderly woman who is one of the few people remaining in the village, as everyone else has gone to their cultivation garden or gone hunting. She is also one of the few elders remaining at upper Saramacca. The geographer has brought a draft map of the Matawai ancestral landscape, a list of places yet to appear on the map, a pen, and a notebook. His goal is to identify the approximate location of some of the most important Matawai sites that do not yet appear on the map. The histories behind some of these places go back centuries to the very first times that her ancestors fled from slavery during Dutch colonial rule, far up and along the rivers where Dutch soldiers could not find them.

Following some small talk, the geographer sits down and asks Dora for assistance, and starts to name a few places. Dora's eyes light up. She does not look at the map. Instead, she spontaneously starts to share a lengthy story, all in her own language, about what transpired at some of these unmapped places. She sings an old hymn that sounds as if it has been passed down over centuries. She animatedly speaks of some of the more important ancestral figures, who took destiny in their own hands by making the Saramacca and Tukumutu rivers their own. Meanwhile, the geographer, scurrying, glances back and forth between his list and his map, struggling to keep track of all the names: "Where did you say that place was located again?"

This encounter in March 2016 was one of the inspirations that led ACT staff to realize the need to collaborate with Amazonian communities in documenting their oral history storytelling traditions. In this moment, we realized that for a small and remote community like the Matawai, whose history primarily



circulates in oral form, the few elders like Dora who remain in the villages are the only sources of knowledge. For most if not all of the communities, oral history storytelling is as integral a part of traditional culture as their healing, dance, or artistic traditions. And, to retool a phrase that ACT co-founder Mark Plotkin is fond of saying about ethnobotany, but applies just as much to oral history:

**"Every time
an Amazonian
elder dies, it is as if
a library burns down."**

Oral histories: An ACT initiative

ACT has actually long been aware of the importance of storytelling for maintaining communities' cultural identity and their relationship to ancestral landscapes. As an organization with decades of experience working with communities to map their territories, we realized very early on the need to capture some of the histories attached to specific places in the community's real-world geography to supplement the maps.¹ For example, in 2001, we published a booklet called *Beyond Samuwaka* as an accompaniment to the Trio land use and territory maps in the southwest of Suriname. In the preface, the author writes:

Why the emphasis on history in land use mapping? History is a part of the people's identity, and among indigenous peoples, it is strongly linked to life in a certain territory. That is why this publication, which is issued in conjunction with the maps of the Trio territories, focuses so strongly in tracing the ancient territory of the Trio.

For the Trio, these histories are passed down from generation to generation through the spoken word. In 2001, however, there was no opportunity to link these oral histories to the maps in a more direct way, and so the organization opted to publish a booklet. Since then, mapping and digital storytelling technologies have advanced rapidly, and now a number of interactive tools such as ESRI's story maps enable us to tell stories with maps, and to use maps to visualize interactive data and media. Thus, when we again encountered the pressing need to document community oral histories fifteen years later, we realized that we could use these emerging technologies to design a novel methodology to work with communities to



¹ In section I of this guide, we will go into more detail about what we mean by these kind of stories, which we call place-based oral histories.



record and map their oral histories about their ancestral lands.

In 2017, we began work in earnest with the Matawai in partnership with a local community foundation, and in 2018 started development of a novel offline-compatible geostorytelling application called [Terrastories](#). At the time of this writing, the project with the Matawai is in its final stages; although there is always more work to be done, we have recorded roughly 17 hours of footage featuring 35 elders, documenting 150 stories for 300 places in the Matawai ancestral landscape (more on the oral histories documentation project with the Matawai [here](#)). The Matawai project has led to a number of promising partnerships and extension projects with entities including the

Smithsonian Institute, the Sundance Institute, and Suriname's Ministry of Culture.

ACT's oral histories documentation initiative is designed to prevent the irretrievable loss of an invaluable source of historical and cultural knowledge; much like ACT's flagship *Shamans and Apprentices* program, it seeks to help halt the loss of traditional knowledge of medicine and healing. As in that latter program, we are not solely interested in documentation for its own sake—instead, we seek to create a resource primarily for the community to learn about their oral histories directly, now and in the future. The communities can use the collected materials in numerous ways, such as educating the youth either as part of a formal school curriculum or outside of it, or as a means to communicate with outsiders. It can also serve as part of the process of recuperating territory in places where oral history is recognized as admissible evidence for land titling, as in British Columbia via the *Delgamuukw v British Columbia* Supreme Court ruling in 1997. As with our ancestral and land use mapping initiatives, we do this in a participatory fashion, where we provide the necessary training and capacity building for younger community members to interview their own elders. Lastly, the initiative fits directly into our strategy to empower the internal governance of our partner communities by providing them with the tools to document their own history, geography, and culture.

Note and disclaimer: This guide describes an emerging methodology under constant refinement, and the Terrastories tool is under active development as well. We are learning as we go along, and sincerely welcome any feedback, criticism, or recommendations to improve our processes, and to make this document as useful as possible!

I. What is place-based oral history?

Storytelling, in the most general terms, is something we all do as human beings. Storytelling is a practice that connects us to our humanity. It links us to our past, and can provide a glimpse into our future. Since humans first walked the earth, long before the written word, we have told stories. Through cave drawings and over fires, humans told stories as a way to give form to our existence. In the contemporary era, storytelling has proliferated in innumerable ways, including social media and virtual reality, yet we continue to tell stories in the archaic form on a daily basis.



The form and content of stories can vary in countless ways, as widely as the limits of language and expression itself. One type of story that can be found in almost all societies, however, are *stories that people tell about their past, or about the past of their community*. These kinds of accounts are commonly called **oral histories**.²

Oral histories provide a narrative of things or events that are believed to have taken place in the past, but they are often told in a way to meaningfully relate them to present realities. In the words of Jan Vansina, in his book *Oral Tradition as History*,

“People in oral histories go out from the present when they think about the past.”

Importantly, while the past is referenced, it may be difficult or impossible to reconstruct the “one true story” of what happened. As Vansina points out, the narrative of an oral history may still represent the tenor of the original message, but in most cases, it fuses several accounts and has acquired a stabilized form. Oral histories also can be told from a political perspective, for example as it pertains to land tenure claims in non-literate societies.

Oral histories most often recount the deeds of individuals or a group, and frequently also relate where these deeds took place. In our own personal oral histories, we might share stories about places where we grew up, or where something pivotal happened that changed the course of our lives (or those of our ancestors). Sometimes, community oral histories are stories about conflicts or migrations that took place somewhere. Oral histories can also be creation stories, which may point to a specific physical location for the origin of the universe. In this guide, we will call oral histories with a specific reference to a real place that can be mapped as a **place-based oral history**.

As most humans have a homeland, our stories are usually infused with references to the geographic spaces we inhabit. Yet the underlying geography of oral history storytelling is not documented to the same degree as other aspects of these narratives. **This guide is intended to redress this deficiency by proposing a methodology intended specifically to document what we call place-based oral histories.**

² Sometimes, the term “oral history” refers to the practice or methodology of conducting historical research by conducting interviews with living individuals about their life history. For example, the Oral History Association (OHA) defines oral history as a research method in the most general terms as “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events.” Here, we exclusively use the term to refer to the stories themselves.



Oral histories in non-western contexts

For many communities across the world, like the indigenous communities of the Americas, oral history storytelling is a cultural tradition imbued with traditional knowledge and associated with practices and values essential to developing personal identity.

In many cases expressed primarily in oral form, oral histories are passed down from generation to generation, and can be essential to the development of the worldview of young members of a community. Sometimes, oral histories are expressed in the native tongue; for that reason, the Wikitongues initiative to create a permanent record of all presently endangered languages uses oral history recording as a key method for preserving language. Indigenous oral histories can also express moral and philosophical guidance for communal good living, or buen vivir.

Many indigenous communities have an oral tradition in terms of both content and form. The content (or products) refers to the oral histories themselves, whereas the form is the specific way in which these oral histories are shared. There might be a performative element such as song and dance, a format such as call and response, the use of objects, a designated set of speakers, or a venue. The use of video recording enables us to document both the content and form of oral tradition.

In ACT's experience working with indigenous and other traditional communities in South America, oral histories are very often place-based, referencing important or sacred sites in the community's territory.



For many indigenous communities, territory is much more than just the extent of their land occupation: it is integrally tied to identity, body, health, spirituality, and sometimes even their view of the very origins of the cosmos.

In a recent article about shamanic knowledge and acculturation among the Trio indigenous community in Suriname, anthropologists Vanessa Elisa Grotti and Mac Brightman illustrate very well how prevalent place can be for indigenous peoples;

Boaz, our host grandfather in Tëpu, related the following: “Today, Vanessa is here in Tëpu. She has come here. I have also come here from my own village. I was little in Pono Eku, which was a very large village; there were many of us there ... Now I live in Suriname, in the white people’s village [pananakiri ipata].” Here Boaz illustrates a tendency shared with all of the people whose life stories we collected. They describe one or, more often, several places in which they spent their childhood and youth and mention their close kin with whom they lived in those places. Most narratives read almost like lists of people and places. By way of example, here is an extract from [another Trio informant]’s story: We were there before, at Pokorowa. I was at Tëpumìn Eneto, and I was in that village. I was small there, and my father was there, he had married my mother. My father went to Paruma, he had lived in Paruma. So there, in Pokorowa, my father married my mother. So they had children, me and my brothers. I was born in Tëpumìn Eneto. But my grandfather did not want my mother to marry my father, because he was not kind to other people. But Tamarema was very kind, he was the father of my uncles. Tamarema was also the father of my mother. My mother was there in Tëpumìn Eneto, there were Kuramenaru and Jukëreton, their father was kind and happy ... Then, we left the village of Pokorowa because somebody died there, it was my aunt who died. Then we went to the new village of Oto Entu. I was there because my father had made a new village. Then my father died in Tipokìnen Kentë ... Two people died in our old village of Oto Entu. Then we went to the other village of Susare Eku ... then my uncle died, my mother’s brother. Then we went a bit further down, to Siririkane, near Surare Eku, we used to say that the Siririkane was a water spirit ... then we left because we no longer had a leader. That’s why we split, we separated. First we were with our relatives in Kuwatapenman. Sikrai died in Kuwatapenman, he lived in Tinkaipoeinkato ...

Fundamentally, young members of the communities get to know their territory in two ways: first, by navigating, traveling, and migrating across the area, frequently with a person who can tell them about what they are seeing and experiencing; and second, through storytelling—by sitting with elders and listening to their oral histories about the territory. The two processes are deeply connected. Without having moved around in the territory, it is possible to know neither the places referenced in the stories, nor their location; if community members have not heard the stories, these places may be devoid of meaning, significance, content, or spirit.



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The remainder of the text is intended to be a practical guide on how to document place-based oral histories, based on our experience working with three traditional communities in South America: *the Matawai of Suriname*, *the Kogui of Colombia*, and *the Waura of Brazil*.

Section II lays out the methodology that we use in full. Section III and IV are about selecting and using recording equipment in the field. Section V is about the Terrastories application we are developing. Section VI is a list of other methodologies and resources that we have encountered in researching. The guide ends with a glossary, and three case studies about working with the three-abovementioned communities.



II. ACT's participatory place-based oral history documentation methodology

Because territory and oral story are interwoven for indigenous and other traditional communities in South America, ACT has decided to focus on both simultaneously.³ By mapping and recording their place-based oral history storytelling traditions, we aspire to help the communities preserve their oral histories about their territory now and in the future. The objective is to curate a resource to educate future generations about their ancestral landscape and maintain the intimate connection they have to their territory.

In essence, three things are required to document place-based oral histories:



(1) a map featuring places of significance;



(2) recordings of stories about the places; and



(3) a tool to link the stories with the places.

In analog form, this could be a key or legend; but, using digital tools like an interactive map, the two can be tied together more directly.

In some ways, it is possible to minimally accomplish all three of these things with existing mainstream digital tools. There are a number quality open source mapping and video editing programs, and one can use Google, Mapbox, or ArcGIS Online together with videos hosted on YouTube to build a simple interactive map with storytelling content. However, many of the indigenous communities in the Amazon rainforest do not have access to internet connectivity, and if they do, it is both costly and has a weak signal. In addition, while sufficient, none of these tools is built for the very specific needs of this methodology, such as an ability to have restricted and customized content. Consequently, ACT partnered with the network of volunteer programmers Ruby for Good to develop a new geostorytelling application that is central to this methodology: **Terrastories**. The process of working with Terrastories is described below, as well as in Chapter V of this guide.

While each community's needs are different, and the exact details and order of the steps may vary (or take place concurrently), ACT's recommended methodology is as follows.

³ That being said, a large part of the methodology as described below can be applied for documenting oral histories that are not place-based. Steps A, B, D, and G could be followed to record a different kind of storytelling tradition, and sections III and IV of this guide, about selecting recording equipment and best practices for recording in this field, can still be useful as well. In general, we recommend reading the methodology as follows, and making adjustments as needed for the specific project needs.

A. Identifying local partners, defining roles, and establishing FPIC

At the outset of any community project, it is imperative to have transparency and the awareness and buy-in of all stakeholders across the board. This is especially true of an initiative to record oral histories that may express sacred or otherwise restricted knowledge, not to be shared with outsiders.

The approach that ACT recommends is to work in a participatory fashion, together with a local representative from the community, which could be a community-based organization (CBO) or motivated persons from the community who want to take action to preserve their community's oral histories. There are several reasons for this.



1. First, and most importantly, having direct community involvement will ensure that the community, and not the supporting outsider NGO or activists, is in the driver's seat when it comes to giving shape to the project.

The methodology seeks to enable the community to document their own oral histories, rather than having the documentation performed on their behalf by an outsider. The maps and recordings are principally produced for the benefit of the community, and there is no better way to ensure that it meets this objective than by having the community take charge of the process as much as possible, with the outside party playing a more technical, capacity-building, or advisory role.



- 2.** Secondly, community members themselves are going to know best where to begin in terms of identifying possible elders to be interviewed, subject matters and places to discuss. If applicable, they can converse with the elders in the native language. Moreover, they will be able to arrange logistics.



- 3.** Third, having direct community involvement will ensure that community members will feel comfortable imparting their stories, and are less likely to perceive the project as “extractivist”, with little sharing of results.



- 4.** Lastly, one of the secondary goals of the methodology is to stimulate opportunities for inter-generational transmission of knowledge throughout the project. By creating spaces for elders to share and youth to listen and ask, traditional knowledge is passed down from generation

Once a local partner is identified, the project roles should be clearly defined and socialized.

- What exactly is the role of the outside party, and the local stakeholder(s)?
- How involved should the outside party be?
- Is the outside party’s primary role to train community members to do the work, or will they be more actively involved?
- Who is in charge of processing and editing the materials?

Finally, it is vitally important that there is free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) with the entire community throughout the process. At no point should the work commence without proper consensus according to the local customs, whether it be buy-in from the traditional leadership or a collective form of approval. Again, this is true across the board for any community project, but it cannot be stressed enough when working with one of the most sacred and intimate forms of traditional knowledge.

B. Assembling and training the project team; obtaining equipment

There are several different tasks and components involved in this methodology, in some cases requiring specific skill sets. At the outset, you should identify who is responsible for which task, from the initial stakeholder engagement to the curation of the Terrastories application. Consider that this methodology requires the following tasks:



Community engagement



Participatory mapping



GIS and cartography



Video and audio recording



Conducting interviews



Editing audiovisual materials



Installing and setting up Terrastories



Depending on the nature of the project and the capacity of the community, you may wish to have the community directly involved in the mapping and recording, and have technical staff handle the digital aspects of the work. Alternatively, you could focus on training the community members to take over the whole process as much as possible.

As part of this phase, trainings and workshops should be scheduled to build the capacities of the project team that will be working on the above tasks. Where necessary, the team should consult resources exterior to this guide, such as guides on basic GIS, video editing, or proper interview practices.

At this point, equipment for the project also must be obtained. This includes mapping equipment (if necessary) such as sketch mapping materials and GPS units; recording equipment, as described in chapter III of this guide; and hardware for hosting Terrastories, as described in chapter V of this guide.

C. Participatory mapping of the community's territory

Since the inception of the organization, ACT has partnered with communities to help them make maps of their land. This approach has yielded a number of landmark cultural and land use maps over the years, which map out local knowledge about places of interest and territory at a remarkable level of detail. ACT described its participatory mapping methodologies in a guidebook called [Methodology of Collaborative Cultural Mapping](#), published in 2008. Although the tools are now somewhat outdated, the methods are still sound. Hence, instead of describing our participatory mapping methods in detail here, we refer to this document as a recommended guide for producing maps that will serve as the foundation for the oral history recordings.

The purpose of conducting participatory mapping in the context of this methodology is twofold: to create a database of places to reference during the oral history interviews, and to gather geographical data that will serve as the basemap for Terrastories. The type and quantity of places to map will vary depending on the community, but as a general rule of thumb, it is beneficial to have as much mapping data representing local knowledge of the community's territory as possible. Even if many of the places are not referenced in the oral histories, the additional data helps contextualize where the storied places are located relative to the rest of the territory. For example, in the case of ACT's Matawai oral histories project, there were over 700 places mapped during expeditions, but of these, only about 150, or fewer than a quarter, were referenced in the oral histories. Nevertheless, all 700 places were included on the basemap of the Terrastories build for the Matawai.



If an ancestral lands geodatabase is already in existence as a result of prior mapping work, it may not be necessary to conduct additional mapping expeditions or fieldwork. For communities where doing so is necessary to gather the oral histories, a list of topics and places that will be asked about during interviews must be generated.

D. Conducting and recording oral history interviews

This is likely to be the most intensive phase of the project, requiring the most logistical planning and dedication of time by the project team. If the community's territory is very extensive and the people live in scattered settlements, it may also be quite expensive to arrange for transportation to visit the elders who will be interviewed (potentially an important project financial consideration).

As observed in Chapter I, place-based oral history will vary from community to community within a given cultural group.

Every community shares stories in their own way, and it is imperative to adapt the interviewing methodology accordingly, ruling out a one-size-fits-all approach.

That said, at ACT, we try to have a young community member sit down with an elder to ask meaningful questions about their territory that guide and prompt the elder to share their place-based oral histories. The object of this phase is to interview as many community members about as many places and topics as possible.

The first step in this phase is to work with the community partner to identify a list of people to be interviewed. Because community oral history tends to be remembered most strongly by the oldest members of the community, the focus will likely be on elders, but depending on the project, a different community



member focus could be emphasized. Here, it is very helpful to think together with the community partner about what kind of person is likely to know certain stories better than others.

For example, the Matawai in Suriname have a gendered division of labor, where men travel extensively across the Saramacca River, which is the focal feature of their territory, whereas the women tend to stay home in the village longer. Therefore, the men are more likely to know more distant places along the river, and the women more likely to focus on village life. The Kogui of Colombia have a special class of spiritual leaders called *mamos*, who guide the community by imparting a special type of oral history narrative called *shibulama*. Because ACT's oral histories documentation work there focused on shibulama about spiritual sites in their territory, we recorded the *mamos*. (Moreover, because *mamos* are prepared to speak at length without an interlocutor, it did not make sense to have a younger community member interview them.)

Once you have a list of potential interview subjects, the community partner can make contact, prepare the subjects for the visit, and make appointments. The subjects should be made aware of the nature and value of the project, so that full consent is established and they are comfortable speaking when they are being recorded. It is absolutely preferable that a fellow community member prepares them, in order to establish a relationship of trust.

Depending on the specific lived experience of these interview subjects, it is advisable to prepare lists of topics and places that they are most likely to know about. Upon arrival, before recording (and while setting up the equipment – see chapter IV), it can be helpful to sit down with the interview subject to further filter through the list, to avoid wasting time asking about places or topics with which the person has little familiarity.

You should also have an open and honest conversation about consent with the interview subject. Assure them that no materials will be used or shared with anybody without their prior knowledge and permission. You may choose to go through the different options for recording with them: they may not be comfortable with being filmed but comfortable with audio, and they could decide to not share their name and remain anonymous. Because the oral histories being recorded are frequently one of the only records of the lived experience of marginalized communities, you may also want to ask them if they consent to ethically responsible study in the future, such as linguistic, historical, or anthropological research. The entire conversation can be recorded and set aside as a verbal acknowledgement of consent. However, consent should be viewed as a continual process, as the person may change their mind later on, and their wishes should be respected at all times.⁴

⁴ We are grateful to professor Jorge Rosés Labrada at the University of Alberta Department of Linguistics for his insights on the subject of consent.



Before diving into the specific oral histories questions, if a young person is engaged, there may be value in asking this individual to present an opening statement about the importance of the conversation and/or the speaker, and to ask the speaker to state their name, place of birth, and (if appropriate) age. Chapter IV describes additional best practices for recording in a field setting, including setting up a proper shot; audio and noise control; post-interview activities, and audiovisual file storage.

On the subject of language, we recommend emphasizing that the interviews be done in the native tongue as much as possible. This is not only to ensure that the storytelling takes place in the original language, but also to enable the oral histories recordings to serve an additional and important function: that of helping to preserve a potentially endangered language by presenting a raw example of language as it is candidly spoken, as per the abovementioned Wikitongues methodology. Lastly, encouraging community members to speak the native language can help them understand that this is a project truly intended for internal use, and not for outsiders who do not understand the language.

Upon commencement of interviewing, because different individuals may present different versions of an oral history, you may consider whether it will be worth recording a certain oral history multiple times. (Note: There may be politics involved in sharing an oral story with a certain perspective, such as one that touches on land tenure.) On the other hand, you may observe that a given oral history has been presented serially with little to no variation, and therefore decide it is worth skipping in future interviews in favor of stories you have not recorded before.

Because oral history storytelling is a living, ongoing tradition, in theory this project phase has no horizon, and in the case of many communities whose histories are transmitted orally, there are likely to be countless histories that never will be recorded. The project team's efforts probably will only ever capture the tip of an iceberg—though, to borrow a metaphor from the anthropologist Richard Price, the iceberg is rapidly melting, and the need to take action is highly urgent. Still, the project team may decide internally on the number of interviews necessary to sufficiently populate Terrastories for the community. Here, it is important to note that there is no requirement that the work to record oral histories end upon completion of the first product: it can continue long after the first version of Terrastories is launched.



E. Designing the digital map; processing media recordings

Mapbox is an open-source mapping platform for custom-designed maps. The Terrastories geostorytelling application that ACT uses in this methodology is built on the Mapbox platform.



Once all of the mapping data has been collected and compiled, it can be uploaded to Mapbox Studio...



...where the team member(s) in charge of GIS & cartography can lay out, style, and design the map that will serve as the base for the community's Terrastories build.



For use of Mapbox Studio, refer to the many online tutorials, guides, and videos made available by Mapbox.



Once the digital map has been finalized, the map style can be downloaded from Mapbox Studio in preparation for building Terrastories.

Prior to starting to build Terrastories, the other essential task is the processing and editing of audiovisual content. If you recorded video and audio separately, you must sync them up using a program like Adobe Premiere. You may choose to add fade-in and fade-outs to the video content, or add B-roll footage, subtitles, or title screens.



It also may be necessary to fix up some imperfections, like audio wave peaking. Depending on the nature of the interview, it may be necessary to cut the recordings into smaller clips.

For transcription, a linguist colleague has recommended the free SayMore software designed by SIL International. The software can be used for easy transcription and oral translations, organizing files and metadata, and media conversion.

Importantly, the video files should be exported at a lower resolution format, bearing in mind the storage space of the media content. As the amount of storytelling increases, so will the file size of the Terrastories instance, which may be a resource drain on your hosting hardware. Also, if you are using a mini-computer to beam an offline WiFi signal or are hosting Terrastories online (see Chapter V), it will take time to stream video files of a large file size. Therefore, we recommend exporting videos as a lower resolution mp4. For the Matawai oral histories project, an export with videos at 720x480 of roughly 13 hours of video footage came out to about 4.3 GB.

F. Building Terrastories for the community



Once the project team determines that they have conducted a sufficient number of interviews, and the Mapbox map has been designed, it is time to start building Terrastories. The instructions to set up and populate Terrastories are on the GitHub page, which will always have the most detailed and up-to-date instructions. However, in short, the process to build Terrastories is as follows:

- Download the application
- Add the map shapefiles and style file to the application
- Install and run the application, creating the map tiles in the process
- Customize the style of Terrastories for the community via the administrative back end
- Set up the permissions and credentials for the community via the administrative back end
- Add the storytelling content via the administrative back end

G. Validating data, stories, and permissions

Once Terrastories has been set up and populated with the map and storytelling content, it should be shown to the community. Depending on the context, it may make sense to do this via community-wide meetings, workshops, small focus groups, or on an individual basis. The project team, including the community partners, should determine what serves as proper validation in the case of the specific project. These considerations aside, the objective is to ensure the following:



That the data is accurate, and that the maps have been properly labeled



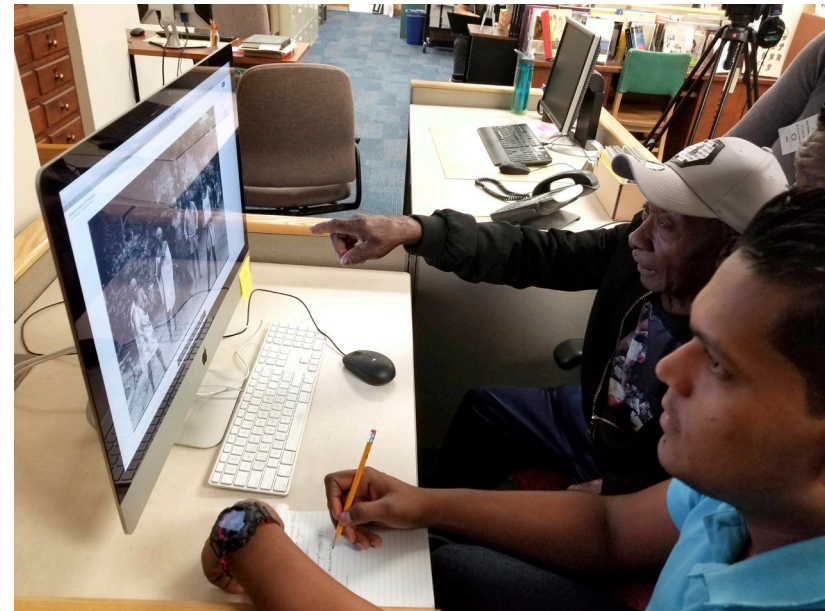
That the Terrastories custom styles are reflective of the community's desired aesthetics



That a sufficient number of stories have been added to Terrastories



That the user permissions to view restricted content have been properly configured



H. Installing Terrastories and final preparations

The final project step is to set up Terrastories on the hardware (or server space) obtained for the project (see chapter V), and to install it for the community. If Terrastories will function offline, this will involve thinking about optimal placement site(s), and protocols for when to run the hardware so that people can access it. The team should also think about access, security, and metrics to track the community's interest in using Terrastories.

At this point, ACT recommends having the local community partner take over the process as the primary administrator of the device and the software. The team should take the time to ensure that the community partner feels comfortable turning the device on and off, loading the application, and showing it to others, especially in the case of those partners who have not worked much with technology before. The team should also think about hosting regular viewing sessions to familiarize the community with the tool, so that they feel comfortable using it on their own.



Another important consideration is the afterlife of Terrastories, and the practice of sharing oral histories. As mentioned previously, there is a risk that the oral histories on Terrastories become recognized as “the authoritative version”⁵. Therefore, it should be emphasized that the practice is a living tradition, and that community members are encouraged to add their own story to the application. In the future, we will build in functionality for Terrastories to make it easier to submit a story as an anonymous user, but in the meantime, the project team should consider leaving behind a protocol so that the recording of storytelling can live on beyond the duration of a typical project life cycle.

⁵ Richard Price, who recorded a number of Saamaka oral histories in his book *First-Time: A Historical Vision of an African American People* struggled with a similar tension, worth reading and reflecting on:

“Consider the potential impact of this book on the Saramaka system of knowledge. In 1978, on my second night in Saramaka that year, I wrote down the following break thoughts in my field notebook: I am struck forcefully and painfully, and really for the first time ever in the field, by the way in which my authority (the authority of my findings [archival, oral]) influences or crystallizes or freezes ‘the truth’ for those Saramakas who hear it. It would, for example, be impossible for somebody to work on Kwasimukamba [an important story for which I had found considerable archival corroboration] with Matjaus ever again and not get the story as I tell it now. The moral choice on my part is a difficult one; on the one hand, the wish/obligation to share and exchange knowledge with the people who share it with me; on the other hand, the danger of interfering in a system of knowledge, in the very way it functions. The main justification for my telling Saramakas even as much [outside, written] information as I do is the rapidity with which the system is dying [as the old men pass away]. But this is hardly a persuasive argument. Insofar as the contents of this book, and not just its physical form, will reach Saramaka, this issue remains alive. My decision to publish is made with a strong sense of the speed with which *First-Time* knowledge is disappearing, with the reassurance that the main participants in my learning have approved publication, and with the expectation (based on past experience) that the book’s contents will only very gradually and very partially penetrate to the level of those elders who most directly participate in the system of knowledge”

Another related consideration is in regards to the future life of the recordings. While Terrastories as a web application can serve as a long-term repository for the recordings, the hardware on which it is installed may fail, and funding for hosting an online version is likely to run out. In addition, the entity or persons supporting the specific instances of Terrastories are not going to be able to sustain it forever. One option is to deposit the materials in an archive associated with a university.

There are some archives that have a specialized focus on indigenous language such as the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA) at the University of Texas, the California Language Archive at the University of California-Berkeley, and the other institutions that are members of the Digital Endangered Languages and Musics Archive Network (DELAN). However, with the growing academic interest in oral history, numerous other archives elsewhere that could serve as a proper repository for the Terrastories build, or the recordings by themselves. As with anything in this methodology, the community should be aware and consent to this decision, however, and have the full right to decide if any content should remain restricted and under what conditions.



III. Selecting recording equipment

In this chapter, we discuss audio and video recording equipment for conducting oral histories interviews, with the remote, rainforest context where ACT works specifically in mind.

TIPS FOR SELECTING AN OPTIMAL KIT FOR YOUR PROJECT

In principle, the bare minimum equipment needed to record oral history storytelling is a device that records audio and video, or even just audio. Nowadays, many smartphones can easily record a perfectly adequate quality video recording. However, in order to achieve higher quality production, the optimal set of equipment will vary depending on context, based on a trade-off between the following considerations.

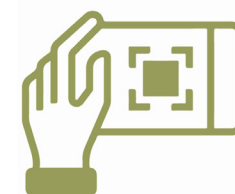
Desired quality of production:

Do you want an HD, high-resolution picture, or is something smaller sufficient? Should the audio be clear, crisp, and free of background noise, or is a recording where the voices are audible sufficient? If there are multiple speakers, should each be mic'd up? Should the image be stable, free of movement or disturbances? Do you want multiple camera angles? How dynamic should the image be – static, or with panning and zooming? What is the maximum length of a single recording session that you will need?



Technical capacity of participants:

How much experience and capacity does the recording team have in working with recording equipment? How much training and time will it require, and is allotted in the project timeline, to build up capacity to work with the desired equipment? How participatory will the project be in nature – that is, will NGO staff accompany (or are themselves part of) the recording team, or will the recording be entirely and autonomously handled by the community? Is it important or beneficial for the project that the community members use technology they already own, like their smartphones (which require no learning curve and therefore might facilitate a more participatory methodology)?



Recording environment:

What is the terrain like where the team is traveling? Will there be a lot of ascending and descending steep hills, lugging around equipment? Is the travel very river-based, and therefore with risks of water damage? Is there generally a lot of wind or dust where the team will be recording? Will recording sometimes take place in bright sunlight? Are there any risks of theft or lost items? How often will the team have the chance to access electricity, for charging or downloading files from equipment?



And last but not least:

Funding:

How much can be allocated towards equipment, workshops, training, and fieldwork?



ACT obtained this field kit for the purpose of recording oral histories in villages along the Saramacca River. For this kit, we prioritized high-quality production with a number of lens options, and watertight storage due to the river travel conditions. We also considered that the ACT team would be doing much of the recording, at least at first.

Following each item is a description of the function that the item plays in the kit.

When we started to work with the kit, we ended up not using a number of the add-ons. The essential equipment (in terms of specifications) is highlighted with a bold, yellow color.

XLR camera & add-ons

- **Canon EOS 70D camera with 18-135mm lens** – This is the primary video recorder, as well as the camera for still photos. This lens has an extensive zoom range, so it's quite possible to set the camera on the Manfrotto tripod at a distance and zoom in on the subject(s).

- **Canon 18-135mm lens:** HD wide-angle converter – This converter attaches to the end of the lens, to extend the scope of the lens (enabling a wider view).
- **Canon 18-135mm lens:** HD telephoto converter – This converter attaches to the end of the lens, to extend the focal length of the lens (enabling a larger zoom).
- **Canon 18-135mm lens:** photo lens hood – This hood attaches to the end of the lens, to block out excess light.
- **Canon 18-135mm lens: UV, CPL, FLD filter kit** – This consists of three different filters: UV to minimize the effect of day/sunlight, CPL (circular polarizer) to suppress glare or darken skies, and FLD to record in fluorescent light.
- **RØDE VMGO video mic kit** – The RØDE video mic can be mounted on top of the Canon EOS 70D camera, and plugged into the camera's mic plug using the accompanying red cable. This provides much better input audio than the built-in recorder of the camera.
- **RØDE WS6 deluxe windshield** – The windshield should cover the entirety of the RØDE video mic, to block out any wind noise or other distortions, at all times.
- **Three batteries, and two chargers** – There are three batteries and two chargers for this recorder, plus an adapter charger.

HD camcorder

- **Canon VIXIA HF R700 Camcorder** – The Canon VIXIA is a simple, minimalistic hand-held camcorder that is able to record high-quality video with little fuss or setup. It also can be placed on a tripod, and can record an indefinite amount of video until the storage is filled or the batteries run out.
- **Canon 43mm UV filter** – UV to block out excess sunlight.

- **Three batteries and charger** – There are three batteries for the camcorder and a charger for this recorder.
- **Camcorder bag** – A compact bag/case for the camcorder and various items.

Field audio recorder

- **Zoom H6 recorder** – This is a dedicated audio recorder that can record up to six channels of audio. However, the one that we will primarily be using in the field is the microphone module.
- **Zoom XY microphone module** – This microphone module can be mounted on top of the Zoom H6 recorder. The XY microphone module has dual mics that can record at 90 or 120 degree angles.
- **Zoom WSU-1 hairy windscreen** – The windscreen should be placed on top of the Zoom H6 microphone to block out any wind noise or other distortions, at all times.
- **Zoom HS-1 camera mount** – This mount is used to place the Zoom H6 on top of either of the two tripods.
- **AA batteries** – The Zoom H6 recorder runs on AA batteries, so carrying a substantial quantity to the field is desirable.

File storage

- **Four 64gb elite performance (95mb/s) SD cards** – High-speed and high-storage SD cards for storing long and HD video files on the Canon EOS camera or Canon VIXIA camcorder.
- **Two LaCie Rugged 4TB external drives** – These rugged externals are for storing the audiovisual files after a day of shooting.
- **SD card reader** – A USB portable card reader for SD cards.

Tripods

- **Manfrotto MK290XTA3 tripod** – This large, professional tripod is equipped with a fluid ball to minimize jagged movements, and can be used to mount either the Canon EOS camera or the Canon VIXIA camcorder.
- **Mobile JOBY GorillaPod** – A smaller and flexible tripod that can be placed on a table or on the ground. Can be useful for all three devices, but envisioned to be used with the Zoom H6 recorder, which should be placed as close to the subject as possible.

Storage

- **Pelican 1510 carry-on watertight case** – This watertight case is for housing all of the equipment. It is designed to fit into the carry-on area of an airplane, so there is no need to check it in and thereby risk items or the entire kit being stolen.
- **Backpack for SLR/DSLR cameras** – to carry a subset of the equipment in a backpack.

Miscellaneous

- **Sony MDR-7506 headphones** – A quality pair of headphones to monitor the sound levels, especially for the Zoom H6 recorder. It is a best practice to ensure that the sound levels are optimally set on the devices before beginning the interview.
- **Headphone male-to-male extension cable** – for plugging in the headphones into the devices.
- **Notebook/pens** – to keep track of interview subjects and metadata.
- **AA/AAA battery charger plus rechargeable batteries** – AAA for the Zoom recorder.

· **Instruction manuals** – Manuals in English for the SLR camera, the VIXIA camcorder, and the Zoom H6 recorder. Instructions also in Spanish available.

· **Cleaning kit** – includes lens-cleaning solution, microfiber cloth, lens tissue paper, cotton swabs and other items to keep lenses clean.

· **HDMI cable** – to connect with a monitor display.

· **USB wires** – to connect the equipment to a computer.

· **Plastic bags** – Various sizes of plastic bags to keep equipment safe and watertight.

Various options exist for working with this kit:

· **Standard (as explained above):** The most common kit option will be to use the Canon 70D recorder with the Manfrotto tripod (and RØDE microphone) for video, and the Zoom H6 recorder with the GorillaPod for audio separately.

· **Minimal:** A less intensive option will be to use the Sony VIXIA Camcorder instead of the Canon 70D and a Zoom H1 digital audio recorder in place of the Zoom H4 or H6.

· **All-in-one:** The Zoom H6 recorder can be placed on top of the Canon 70D recorder and plugged in for sound, so as to have an all-in-one kit producing a video file with high-quality audio already synced in. (However, the tripod will need to be placed closer to the subject(s) to properly pick up the audio.) Alternatively, one could also use the RØDE microphone mounted on the camera if stereo audio is not necessary.

· **Audio only:** Use the Zoom H6 recorder with one of the tripods for an audio-only setup. Accompanied with a GorillaPod to mount the digital recorder along with a windscreen.

SAMPLE KIT 2: KOGUI ORAL HISTORIES



ACT obtained this field kit for the purpose of recording oral histories along sacred sites and villages in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, Colombia. For this kit, we prioritized user-friendly equipment for a fully participatory methodology, with the Kogui team doing the recording entirely; lightweight components with a backpack for easy travel up and down a mountainous region; and solar power for charging in a context without electricity.

Following each item is a description of the function that the item plays in the kit.

HD video recorder



- **2x Canon VIXIA HF R800 Camcorder** – The Canon VIXIA is a simple, minimalistic hand-held camcorder that can record high-quality video with little fuss or setup. It also can be placed on a tripod, and can record an indefinite amount of video until the storage is filled or the batteries run out.

- **Three batteries and two chargers** – There are three batteries for the camcorder and two chargers for this recorder.

Field audio recorder



- **Zoom H1n recorder** – This is a dedicated audio recorder that has a basic but sufficient dual mic recording setup.

- **Zoom WSU-1 hairy windscreen** – The windscreen should be placed on top of the Zoom H1n microphone to block out any wind noise or other distortions, at all times.

- **Zoom HS-1 camera mount** – The purpose of this mount is to place the Zoom H1n on top of the GorillaPod.

- **2x PowerDeWise Pro Grade Lavalier Lapel** – to add lapel mics to the Zoom H1n, as an option.

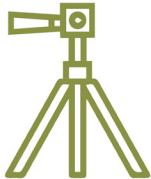
- **AAA batteries** – The Zoom H1n recorder runs on AAA batteries, so carrying a substantial quantity to the field is desirable.

File storage



- **4x Extreme Pro 128GB SD cards** – High-speed and high-storage SD cards for storing long and HD video files on the Canon VIXIA camcorder.
- **6x Sandisk Ultra 64GB Micro SDXC UHS-I Card with Adapter** – MicroSD cards for the H1n audio recorder and for smartphones.
- **1x LaCie Rugged 4TB external drive** – These rugged externals are for storing the audiovisual files after a day of shooting.

Tripods



- **2x Manfrotto MKCOMPACTLT-BK Compact Tripod**– This is a decent and lightweight tripod for mounting the Canon VIXIA recorder. These fit into the backpack obtained for the kit.
- **Mobile JOBY GorillaPod** – A smaller and flexible tripod that can be placed on a table or on the ground. Can be useful for all three devices, but envisioned to be used with the Zoom H1n recorder, which should be placed as close to the subject as possible.
- **2x Jellyfish Spring Tripod Mount for Smartphones** – to add to the Manfrotto tripods, and to be able to mount smartphones that are in the possession of the Kogui team, if they want to use their own phones to record.

Storage



- **TUBU Video Camera Backpack Fit 2 Pro-sized DSLR / SLR Camera** – This is a flexible backpack, designed for a camera, which can hold all of the equipment except for the solar charger.

Miscellaneous



- **Sony MDR-7506 headphones** – A quality pair of headphones to monitor the sound levels, especially for the Zoom H1n recorder. It is a best practice to ensure that the sound levels are optimally set on the devices before beginning the interview.
- **30000mAh Portable Charger** – to charge cellphones while in the field.
- **Yoobao US Portable 4 Port USB Wall Charger** – to charge phones if there is electricity.

Solar power



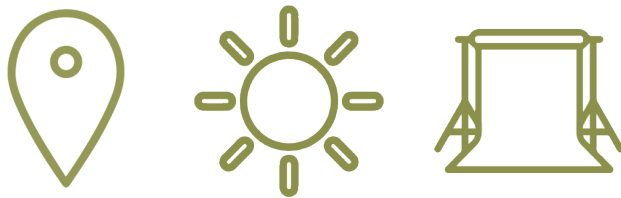
- **GoalZero Sherpa 50 Power Pack** – This is required to store energy generated from the solar panels, useful for charging high up on the Sierra Nevada where there is no electricity.
- **GoalZero Nomad 28 Plus Solar Panel** – Solar panels for charging, which can fit in the backpack.

IV. Best practices for recording in the field

In this chapter, we share some of the best practices that we have learned by conducting oral histories interviews in the context of our oral histories pilots (see case studies at the end of this guidebook). We also recommend reviewing some additional guides on doing oral history recordings and working with equipment, such as the guides located on the Oral History Association's website, [here](#).

PICKING A LOCATION & BACKGROUND, AND SETTING UP THE SHOT

There are a number of different considerations to bear in mind when selecting a place to record the interview. Depending on the project, the location might be very important to the subject being discussed; for example, if the conversation will be about a sacred or historical site, and it is possible to travel and record there. Otherwise, you might want to select a place that feels familiar and comfortable to the speaker, such as in or right outside their home, by the riverbanks, or at their cultivation garden.



When selecting a site, it is very important to consider the amount of background noise that might filter into the recording. This could be the sound of village life (such as kids playing in the background or the sound of an outboard motor from a boat passing by), or the wind. The audio recorders that we use are quite sensitive and will pick up on those kind of ambient sounds very noticeably, so it is recommendable to try to select a site with a minimal amount of background sounds.

In addition, you should consider the background image. If the background is very complex, or there is a lot of movement going on, it could draw attention away from the interview. We recommend using a background that feels intimate, relatively uniform in detail, with colors easy on the eyes, and with features that are representative of the community member's lived experience. Great examples of an effective background could be a forest with a river in the background, or the wooden planks of a building where the interview subject resides.

When shooting outside, bear in mind the direction of the sun: if the interview will take some time, the sun might travel significantly and compromise your lighting set-up (or subject the speakers to prolonged sitting in the hot tropical sun!). You should also consider whether the lighting is sufficient for seeing the faces of the interviewers, especially for persons with darker skin. Shooting in the middle of the afternoon, with the hot Amazonian sun shining bright, can also result in a washed out background. Depending on the context, you may want to only film interviews in the morning and late afternoons.

Examples of effective background composition and lighting:



In this image, both the interviewer (right) and the subject (left) are clearly visible, with ample room for movement. The framing is intimate, and the background is both easy on the eyes and adds a context of village life.



For the Kogui of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, sitting by a sacred rock and listening to one or more of the mamos is a common practice. This image effectively captures this dynamic, with a pleasing background and minimal distraction. The only adjustment that could be made would be to lower the camera a little to not cut off the front two speakers' feet.

Examples of ineffective background composition and lighting:



This recording was captured on location at a sacred site. The narrator, left, is telling the story of the place, and the intention was for the children to sit and listen. However, on the way over to the site, walking through the forest, fleas bit the children. As the video progresses, they started to itch and pick the fleas, which makes for an unintentionally hilarious but very distracting background.



Here, the lighting is too dark to properly make out the subjects' faces. In addition, the image looks very cramped, and both the interviewer (right) and one of the subjects (left) are being cut out of the frame.

SETTING UP THE EQUIPMENT

Video equipment:

For the Canon 70D Camera, place it on a Manfrotto tripod and keep it away at a distance from the interview subjects. You can use either Auto or Manual mode, but with Manual mode, you have greater control over lighting. It is also preferable to use Manual focus, and use the zoom button on the screen to zoom in on the subject(s) and ensure that the focus is as precise as possible. With the 70D camera, the optimal video quality setting is 1920x1080, but with a lower frame rate (like 24) and IBP rendering, because a higher quality video tends to be too much for some high speed SD cards (even those with 10 rating) to handle, and without those adjustments, you would receive the message “The video stopped recording automatically” after some time.

After setting up the video recording device, ensure that it is properly leveled and centered by using a built-in leveler, or by estimating it to the best of your ability. Ensure that you are using lighting levels that are proper for the setting – you do not want dark subjects or poorly/overly lit backgrounds. You will want to position the camera in such a way that the interview subject(s) are the primary object of the frame, but so that they are looking at the interviewer and not the camera. With respect to the interviewer, seat this person so that you can see their profile, allowing the viewer to put themselves in the position of the interviewer in their imagination. Zoom in enough on the speaker(s), but leave enough space in the shot in case they move around or talk with their hands. Take care to ensure that the lens is properly focused on the subjects.

Audio equipment:

When recording outside, always utilize the recorder’s windscreen. The Zoom recorder should be placed on a GorillaPod, very close to the subject(s). It should be out of the video frame, but as close as possible, and facing the subject(s) in order to obtain optimal stereo sound. Because the recorder is never very close to the subject, the volume can be set rather high, for example at 8/9; however, it must be lowered when there is a lot of ambient noise.

Before starting to record, check the sound levels with a pair of headphones and adjust as needed. It is standard to use an 8/9 volume level for the microphone; however, an excessive amount of external



noise may result readjustment, or moving the interview to a different location. You may also notice common sounds that are unexpectedly quite loud, like the sound of feet moving on a dirt floor. Therefore, always check the audio. Ask the interviewers to speak at their normal tone to ensure that the sound is not “clipping” (a term for an instance when the audio level is so high that it reaches the red area of the volume bar, resulting in a poor waveform for the audio). The basic task of field recording is to record at as high a level as possible, without clipping.

Right before beginning to record:

ALWAYS double-check to make sure all devices are recording before giving the signal to the interviewer to begin; it is easy to forget to press record on the Zoom recorders once you have turned on the channels.

It is important for the video recorder to be recording sound even if you are using a separate audio recorder. This is so that the video recording can be synced up with the audio recording later. At the start of the video, give a loud clap in front of the video recorder as a reference point that will make things easier when performing subsequent computer editing and processing.

PREPARING THE INTERVIEW SUBJECT(S)



To ensure that you will get meaningful and substantive answers, take the time to go over the questions or places with the interview subject beforehand. In the case of an oral histories project focused on places/geography, you can review a list of places with the subject, and then compile a separate list of places about which the interview subject is prepared to tell stories. This will avoid having a lot of “well, I know the place and where it is, but I don’t know why it’s called so” content in your video footage, and make for a smoother, better quality interview process and production. If you are working in a team, one member can take care of this part while another sets up the recording equipment. You should also have a conversation with the subject(s) about consent as described in section II, and you may opt to record this conversation (or a portion of it) as a record of the acknowledgment of consent.

It’s also important to confirm with the subject(s) that they are seated comfortably and in a cool temperature, to avoid the interview from being cut off early. Carry water and snacks with you to give to the subject(s) and interviewer if they would like to take a break.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHILE RECORDING

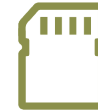
Keep an eye on your equipment to ensure the following:



· Recording is ongoing.



· Battery levels are sufficient.



· Enough disk space remains to record the interview.

In the case of a Canon EOS 70D or similar DSLR cameras, you are leaving enough space approaching the 30-minute limit mark to pause the interview and start recording anew. Also in the case of a Canon EOS 70D or similar DSLR cameras, that the device has not stopped recording automatically due to SD cards not being able to keep up.

Keep an eye on the sun to ensure that changing light is not affecting your product, and take proper precautions beforehand to make sure that no drastic changes will take place in the span of 30-60 minutes.

People not involved in the project may walk by and/or wish to see what is happening. Ensure that these people are not interrupting the video by entering the frame or making excessive noise. Other distracting things may occur in the background as well; keep an eye on these to make sure they won’t diminish the quality of the video product.⁷ The same thing applies to the audio.⁸

⁷ One memorable ACT example of this was a video recording of an elder talking about a sacred site, with children scattered around him. On the way to the site, we had to walk through a patch of forest that has many biting insects. During the recording, the children felt itchy and began picking at their skin. This was unintentionally comical, and certainly detracted from the earnestness of the elder’s narration.

⁸ Here, we can give the example of a girl sitting nearby the interview eating a mango. The sensitive audio recorder picks up the sound of her sucking on the fruit, which is very distracting.



If you are walking to and from devices, take off potentially noisy footwear (like flip-flops) to minimize the noise you yourself are making.

Try not to be too engaged with the conversation taking place (e.g., by smiling, nodding, or laughing along) as this might result in the subject(s) engaging with you as well, for example via eye contact.

In the case of interviewers who are primarily listening, it may be prudent to remind them to minimize their conversational interjections (like “m-hms” and “yeahs”) in order to not distract from the primary speaker.

It is helpful to take notes during the interview—for example, noting down any referenced place names or topics—to help write metadata afterwards.

WHAT TO DO AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Following the interview, you may want to shoot some photos of the subject and/or interviewer. You may also want to record some panning shots of the location that can be used for B-footage later on – especially if you are not returning to the location anytime soon.

Metadata:

Immediately following the interview, record the following information if it did not come up during the interview:

- Subject's name
- Subject's year of birth
- Subject's birthplace (and/or other relevant demographic info)
- Location where interview took place
- Interviewer's name
- Interview date
- Language(s)
- Brief interview summary (including places mentioned)
- Duration of interview

The person being interviewed may have some questions or concerns following the interview. They may have mentioned something in the spur of the moment that they, on second thought, would rather have taken out. Give them the opportunity to reflect on the interview, and see if there is anything they want to add. In many cases, the person also wants to have a personal copy of the recording. If so, you could opt to make an arrangement to bring a DVD or USB stick to them at a later time.

Duration of interview

The person being interviewed may have some questions or concerns following the interview. They may have mentioned something in the spur of the moment that they, on second thought, would rather have taken out. Give them the opportunity to reflect on the interview, and see if there is anything they want to add. In many cases, the person also wants to have a personal copy of the recording. If so, you could opt to make an arrangement to bring a DVD or USB stick to them at a later time.

STORING AND HANDLING MEDIA FILES IN THE FIELD

If you have a laptop with you, it is advisable to store the audio and video files on an external drive for safekeeping and to free up the SD cards as soon as possible. When saving the files to the computer or drive, store all of the media content (video, audio, photos) in a directory format like **/Location/Name/Date/**. Digitize the metadata information into a spreadsheet. Always create a back-up of the files somewhere (and never take this too lightly!).

Troubleshooting:

In ACT's experience, we have seen an SD card become corrupted by a Zoom audio recorder. The recorder was able to play the audio files on the SD card, but when connecting the SD card to a computer, the only thing visible was an infinite loop of subdirectories that would eventually crash Windows Explorer. We used the freeware program **EaseUS Data Recovery Wizard** to recover the audio files without a problem.



TAKING CARE OF EQUIPMENT IN THE FIELD

Always keep your equipment in a watertight case or a similar protective container, as water damage may occur even if it is not raining.

If rain is expected, or if you are traveling by boat and will encounter rapids, pack the case in a few plastic garbage packs for extra safety.

Charge all of your batteries to full before a day of recordings, and clear the SD cards.

Regularly clean your lenses of moisture and smudging, and use a brush to clean the equipment and tripod of dirt, which may get stuck in the grooves.

We have found that with Pelican watertight cases, the inside foam eventually starts to dislodge. Try to keep the foam in place as much as possible, in order to minimize any damage to equipment.

Ensure that all equipment has returned safely following a day of shooting. Bring an equipment checklist with you and review it daily.

If you are working in an environment where security is an issue, always have the equipment with you in eyesight, or lock it up somewhere safe.

V. Using the Terrastories geostorytelling application

This chapter discusses the novel geostorytelling application developed for ACT's oral histories methodology, named Terrastories. It is open-source and free for any community in the world to use to map their own storytelling traditions.

HOW TERRASTORIES WORKS

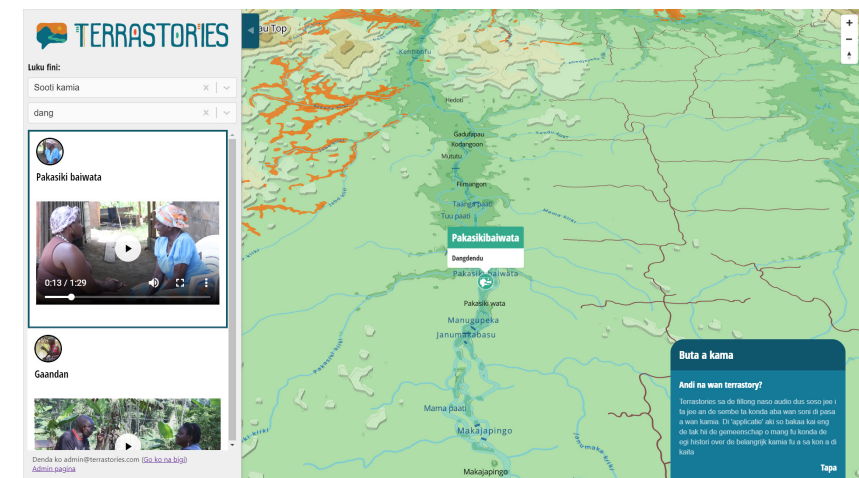
Although a number of digital storytelling and mapping tools are already available, all of these are dependent on internet connectivity. Hence, we recognized from the outset that we needed to develop our own application to be able to show interactive maps and video recordings of storytelling in remote Amazonian locations. Consequently, we took on the task of leading the development of our very first custom software application, named Terrastories.

Terrastories is a geostorytelling application built to enable local communities to locate and map their own oral storytelling traditions about places of significant meaning or value to them. Community members can add places and stories through a user-friendly interface, and make decisions about designating certain stories as private or restricted using a graded access credentials system. Powered by the Mapbox platform, Terrastories is designed to be entirely offline-compatible, so that remote communities can access the application entirely without needing internet connectivity.

The Terrastories interface is principally composed of an interactive map and a sidebar with media content. Users can explore the map and click on activated points to see the stories associated with those points. Alternatively, users can interact with the sidebar and click on stories to see the points in the landscape where these narratives took place.

Through an administrative back end, users can also add, edit, and remove stories, or set them as restricted so that they are viewable only with a special graded login. ACT geographers can design and customize the content of the interactive map entirely, and the interface itself is customizable with a color scheme and design reflecting the aesthetics of the community.

Terrastories works by setting up a local website that is accessible without internet access: a user can be entirely offline, but once <http://terrastories.io> is accessed, the application will load. We have also developed a system through which users can install the application on a mini-computer called a NUC, which sends out a WiFi signal when switched on. Upon connecting to the WiFi signal, the user can then load the application; here again, no internet access is needed. This way, community members can load Terrastories on their own devices. Terrastories can also be set up to work online, if needed or desired.





The design of Terrastories is currently being stewarded by ACT in partnership with a team of volunteer developers called Ruby for Good. The first version of the application was built for the Matawai, and is in a near-finalized state (read about the work to finish Terrastories for the Matawai from the perspective of Mapbox [here](#)). ACT is already using Terrastories for its other oral histories projects, and by the end of 2019, we will release a public and generalizable version.

While Terrastories remains in development, we have full in-house capacity to set up, populate, and curate content for any of our partner communities.

Although Terrastories was developed with ACT's documenting oral histories methodology in mind, it can be used to map any kind of storytelling content (or indeed, just about any kind of audio or video recording that has a geographical reference). We are building Terrastories to be as useful as possible for any community across the world, and welcome feedback on how to make it more practical for different use scenarios.

SETTING UP AND INSTALLING TERRASTORIES

Terrastories is an application under active development. For the most current information, please visit our website at <http://terrastories.io>. Detailed and up-to-date instructions on how to set up, customize, and use Terrastories will always be located on a GitHub page, [here](#).

If assistance is needed, or a guided installation is desired, contact Rudo Kemper at rkemper@amazonteam.org or join the Ruby for Good [#terrastories](#) channel on Slack.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



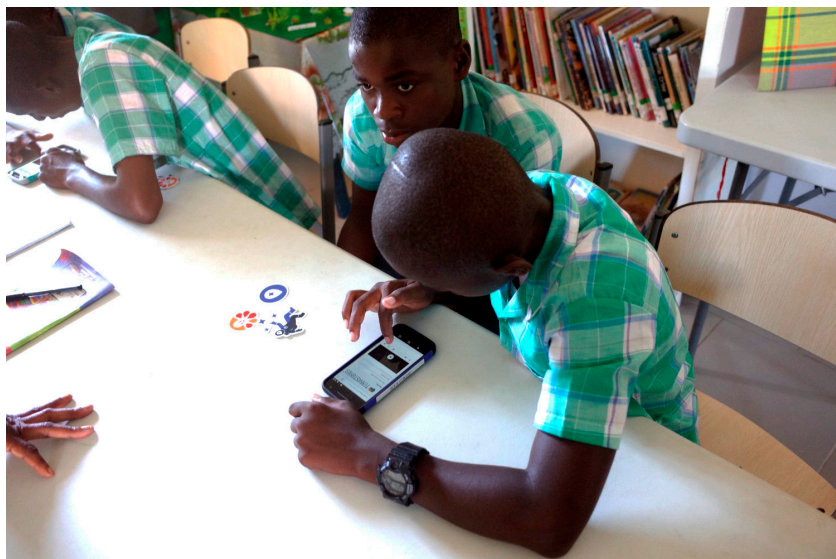
HARDWARE FOR HOSTING TERRASTORIES

Terrastories is designed to work in either online or offline environments, and for both computer and mobile views.

For some communities, it may be adequate to have an online website, in which case basic server costs are the only variable for hosting Terrastories.

For the offline setting, Terrastories can be installed on a desktop or laptop computer, where it will run locally. To run optimally, the computer should have roughly 8 GB of RAM, a GL graphics card, and enough space to host the media content hosted on Terrastories.





In addition, the option exists to install Terrastories on a NUC (Next Unit of Computing) small-unit computer, which beams a WiFi signal that users can connect to with their personal device to load Terrastories. Instructions for setting this up are on the GitHub page linked above. This approach requires specialty hardware, composed minimally of a NUC unit (with a GL graphics card), a hard drive, memory, and a wireless card. For its projects, ACT has obtained the following:

- Intel NUC mini PC kit NUC6i7KYK (Intel Core i7)
- Crucial 8GB Kit (4GBx2) DDR4 2400 MT/S (PC4-19200) SR x8 SODIMM 260
- Samsung 960 EVO Series 250GB PCIe NVMe M.2 Internal SSD

VI. Other methodologies and resources

In this guide, we have focused on a specific methodology to record place-based oral histories and map these using the Terrastories application. Numerous other excellent projects, tools, methodologies and other resources have been created by other parties in the domain of digital storytelling, participatory mapping, and indigenous filmmaking. The following is a non-exhaustive list of such content.

TOOLS

ESRI Story Maps

Esri Story Maps let you combine authoritative maps with narrative text, images, and multimedia content. They make it easy to harness the power of maps and geography to tell your story. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/en/>

Isuma.TV

IsumaTV is a collaborative multimedia platform for indigenous filmmakers and media organizations. Each user can design their own space, or channel, to reflect their own identity, mandate and audience. IsumaTV honors oral languages. It uses less text for navigating the platform. IsumaTV uses icons and color-coded language to be user-friendly to oral cultures online. The IsumaTV Mediaplayer is designed to allow remote communities to participate equally in a world driven by media, in their own language. <http://isuma.tv/>

Mapeo

Mapeo is an easy-to-use offline-mapping app built on iD Editor, the default editor for OpenStreetMap. The organization Digital Democracy built Mapeo for their work with indigenous communities in the Amazon and around the world, who asked for an easier way to create and edit their own maps. <http://mapeo.world/>

Mukurtu

A free Drupal-based content management system for archiving, managing and sharing built for indigenous communities with functionalities to control and set access levels for culturally sensitive materials. <http://mukurtu.org/>

METHODOLOGIES

Ethnographic Mapping Lab Training Materials & Resources

One objective of the University of Victoria's Ethnographic Mapping Lab is to put training materials in the hands of community and professional practitioners, and to conduct community outreach to mobilize the skills to undertake high-quality ethnographic mapping projects. They are currently developing a number of materials, including training manuals, bibliographies, and interview guides and best-practices documents. <https://www.uvic.ca/socialsciences/ethnographicmapping/resources/training/index.php>

Oral History Association Web Guides to Carrying Out Oral History Documentation

The Oral Histories Association (OHA) has compiled a very comprehensive list of resources, methodologies, and guides on documenting oral histories. <https://www.oralhistory.org/web-guides-to-doing-oral-history/>

Project Cobra: Practitioner's Handbook

The Cobra Collective seeks to empower marginalized communities by helping them identify, record and promote community-owned solutions. The main aim of this handbook is to promote community-owned solutions by proposing approaches that respond to current and future challenges to sustainability, natural resources management and biodiversity conservation. The handbook introduces key concepts and techniques that underpin a participatory and

systems approach to community engagement, including the use of participatory visual methods. <http://www.cobracollective.org/practitioners-handbook/>

StoryCenter: Digital Storytelling Workshops

StoryCenter is an organization that creates spaces for transforming lives and communities, through the acts of listening to and sharing stories. Their public program enables people to register individually for storytelling workshops. Their custom program collaborates with organizations around the world, on workshops in story facilitation, digital storytelling, and other forms of participatory media production. StoryCenter also offers online workshops for participatory storytelling methods, and has published a methodology guide on how to hold digital storytelling workshops. <https://www.storycenter.org/>

Wikitongues language reclamation toolkit

Wikitongues volunteers are working to collect video oral histories in every language in the world. To date, they have recorded nearly 1,000 videos in over 400 languages. In coordination with libraries and archival institutions, they are preserving these videos as they go, ensuring long-term public access to every language in the world. Building on the latest research and experiences from their volunteer community, they are developing an actionable, accessible toolkit for language preservation and revival. <https://wikitongues.org/projects/>

OTHER PROJECTS AND INITIATIVES

Arataki Cultural Trails

A New Zealand based project that offers a self-guided fully immersive cultural walking experience. Their proximity storytelling product connects users with authentic cultural content and information via a map based application. <http://arataki.co/>

A:shiwi Map Art

"The A:shiwi have always had maps. We have maps in songs and prayers, painted on ceramics, and etched in stone. Our maps aid our memories and give reference to our places of origin—places we have visited and places we hope to go. Names of places within our territory have been passed-down from generation to generation, but in the past 500 years we have been re-mapped. What was once known as Sunha:kwin K'yabachu Yalanne is now called the San Francisco Peaks, and many people now call Heshoda Ts'in'a by the name Pescado. However, there is an indigenous mapping movement growing around the world, reinforcing indigenous knowledge of ancestral lands and describing the world as a cultural landscape. Through the A:shiwi Map Art initiative, the AAMHC is helping to advance this movement and reverse certain distortions of Zuni history. The A:shiwi Map Art is an art, language and place name project all in one. Sixteen Zuni artists were commissioned to create

paintings representing significant Zuni landscapes and places.” <http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=8161>

Changing Climate, Changing Health, Changing Stories

A community-driven, participatory, storytelling project led by the Rigolet Inuit Community Government in Rigolet, Nunatsiavut. This project utilized digital media to gather place-based narratives, documenting the impacts of climate change on human health and well-being and sharing adaptation strategies. <http://www.townofrigolet.com/home/stories.htm>

Driftscape

Driftscape is a mobile app that provides a platform for local organizations to share site-specific stories, tours and events. For Users, the app is free and it provides a great way to explore what’s around them. Simply select what is of interest, and start walking. You’ll be notified when there’s something nearby. For Organizations, Driftscape is a powerful tool to help you get stories out there. <https://www.driftscape.com/>

Kayapó indigenous videography

“In the 1990s Kayapó videographers from the Brazilian Amazon began producing short films to document their society’s struggles for land, rainforest preservation and cultural survival,” said Richard Pace, professor of anthropology at MTSU and an affiliated professor with CLAS. Pace noted that by 2010, a new generation of Kayapó videographers had begun to emerge. The younger videographers are respectful of tradition, but are seeking to capture new cultural innovations as the Kayapó engage the outside world. <https://news.vanderbilt.edu/2015/03/23/indigenous-use-of-digital-media-focus-of-vu-mtsu-conference-march-26-28/>

The People’s Stories Project

The People’s Stories Project is an exploratory place-based storytelling documentation initiative focused on the Mekong River in Southeast Asia, launched in August 2014 by the Japanese-based NGO Mekong Watch with three purposes: (1) To record legends, old tales, folklore and narratives and access the local knowledge and experience over natural resource use found therein; (2) To develop an environmental education tool kit, which makes practical use of people’s stories to bring about better governance of local resources, and; (3) To convey knowledge of local natural resource use and the richness of the world described in the stories to researchers, students, people involved in development, younger generations and citizens in general, providing a new point of view for observing natural resource management in the Mekong Region. <http://www.mekongwatch.org/peoplestory/about.html>

Return of the Captured Spirits

Return of the Captured Spirits works with the Wauja of the Xingu to document oral history, repatriate ethnographic films and other visuals, and empower native videographers. <http://returnofthecapturedspirits.com/>

The Salt Song Map Project

The Salt Song Map Project is a collaboration between the Storyscape Project of the Cultural Conservancy and the Salt Song Trail Project directed by native scholars Vivienne Caron Jake (Kaibab Paiute) and Matthew Leivas, Sr. (Chemehuevi). The Salt Songs are the sacred songs of the Nuwuvi people and describe a physical and spiritual landscape spanning ocean and desert, mountains and rivers, life and death. The landmarks identified on the map are described by the songs and represent ancient villages, gathering sites for salt and medicinal herbs, trading routes, historic events, sacred areas, and cultural landscapes. At memorial ceremonies, Salt Song singers “throwing the gourd” are accompanied by dancers as they perform the 142-song cycle from sunset to sunrise to assist the deceased in their sacred journey. <http://www.nativeland.org/store-old/the-salt-song-trail-map-the-sacred-landscape-of-the-nuwuvi-people>

Stz’uminus Storied Places

The Stz’uminus Storied Places Digital Atlas research project with the Stz’uminus First Nation in Ladysmith builds off an earlier initiative involving the Stz’uminus First Nation and Project REEL Life, which engaged Stz’uminus youth in digital storytelling and spawned regular outings where Stz’uminus youth recorded HD video of their elders. The current research project introduces a focus on Hul’q’umi’num’ place names and works to bring these place-focused videos into digital maps, so community members can continue to listen to the names and stories via desktop computers, laptops, and, particularly, mobile devices. <https://www.uvic.ca/socialsciences/ethnographicmapping/projects/stzuminus/index.php>

Video nas Aldeias

Created in 1986, Video nas Aldeias (VNA) is a pioneer project in the area of indigenous audiovisual production in Brazil. The objective of the project was, from the outset, to support the struggles of indigenous peoples to strengthen their identities and their territorial and cultural heritage, through audiovisual resources and a shared production with the indigenous peoples with whom VNA works. <http://www.videonasaldeias.org.br/>

WRITTEN RESOURCES

Audio or Video Recording for Oral Histories by Doug Boyd (<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/audio-or-video-for-recording-oral-history/>)

FNIS 454: Indigenous New Media and Digital Storytelling by David Gaertner (syllabus with many resources listed) (<https://novelalliances.com/2016/10/30/fnis-454-indigenous-new-media-and-digital-storytelling/>)

"Digital storytelling: capturing lives, creating community" by Joe Lambert from StoryCenter

"Participatory Visual and Digital Methods" by Aline Gubrium and Krista Harper

"Doing Visual Anthropology" and *"Visual Interventions: Applied Visual Anthropology"* by Sarah Pink

"Global Indigenous Media: Cultures, Poetics, and Politics" by Pamela Wilson and Michelle Stewart

"Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentary and Ethnographic Films and Videos" by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor

VII. Glossary

Ancestral lands:

The lands of an indigenous or other traditional community as defined and delineated by the past occupation and land use of their ancestors.

Digital storytelling:

The use of emerging digital technologies to tell or share stories in innovative ways.

Free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC):

The establishment of bottom-up participation and consultation of an indigenous community prior to the beginning of a project taking place on ancestral land or using resources within the community's territory.

Oral history:

Histories about a series of past events or about a community's ancestors transmitted and shared through the spoken word.

Oral tradition:

Information passed down through generations by word of mouth that is not written down. May also refer to both the content of that information and the form through which it is delivered.

Participatory methodologies:

Methodologies that aspire to actively involve a community in a project of which they are the target, in as many phases as possible (planning, implementation, and evaluation).

Place-based oral history:

Oral history with a specific reference to a real place that can be mapped.

Story map:

Interactive web mapping template developed by the mapping software company Esri, not to be confused with other terms used in this methodology.

Terrastories:

Offline-compatible geostorytelling application being developed to map place-based oral histories.

Territory (indigenous):

Beyond the extent of land occupation, this also may encompass the spiritual and sacred meaning that ancestral lands have for indigenous communities of South America.

Traditional knowledge: Knowledge, skills, or practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a community, often forming part of its cultural or spiritual identity.

Case Study 1: Matawai 'first-time' ancestral knowledge in Suriname

By Rudo Kemper.

Originally published on Intercontinental Cry: Suriname community uses new open-source app to preserve storytelling traditions ([link](#))



"For Saramaka's today...[First-Time] is the fountainhead of collective identity; it contains the true root of what it means to be Saramaka." – Richard Price, First-Time:

The Historical Vision of an African American People.

The Matawai of Suriname, a community that once felt forgotten by the rest of the world, is breaking ground by using a new open-source geostorytelling app to create an extraordinary repository of traditional knowledge through oral history storytelling. The goal of the work is to ensure that future generations of Matawai will be able to learn about their history, culture, and identity in the way that their people always have: through the words of the elders.

The history of the Matawai is one that begins over three centuries ago, when Suriname stood as a Dutch plantation colony. Rather than endure a cruel and punishing life of captivity on the colony's coastline plantations, scores of African enslaved peoples took destiny in their own hands and escaped into the dense rainforests of the country's vast interior. Bands of fugitives fled along the ascending rivers, leading them as far southward as they could. They evaded and battled with Dutch soldiers who sought to recapture them, embarked on raids to liberate others from slavery, and eventually forced the colonial government to sign a peace agreement with them.

Different groups of these formerly escaped slaves established themselves in the center of Suriname's interior, where their descendants continue to reside.

The members of these Afro-descendant communities proudly describe the first days their ancestors settled in and fought for what is now their traditional homeland. For many commentators, their extraordinary history is among the most distinctive and fascinating in the wide range of African-American diaspora experiences.

One of the smallest of these communities are the Matawai, who reside along the banks of the Saramacca River in central Suriname. For the Matawai, survival in the rainforest has always depended on an intimate knowledge of their territory, passed down by their ancestors. Place-based oral histories help them determine where food or resources are located, or where dangers lie hidden. Most importantly, ...

...the oral histories reinforce their historical and cultural connection to their homelands, which in turn informs their collective identity and encourages them to protect their environment.

Until a few years ago, the Matawai territory was among the most remote in the country, accessible only by boat or by small aircraft. However, rampant and destructive alluvial gold mining activity, new telephone towers, and the recent creation of a network of roads servicing logging operations and connecting the twenty-one Matawai villages have brought rapid and sweeping changes.

In this changing landscape, younger Matawai are increasingly finding employment in the gold mines or leaving to go work and live a more modern life in the capital city of Paramaribo.

Many Matawai villages have an empty or desolate aura to them, with only a few Matawai continuing to live in a traditional way. The remaining elders frequently lament that the youth are more interested in their phones than they are in their stories, and have stopped sharing their narratives entirely. Consequently, the longstanding Matawai oral tradition of sitting around and sharing stories of the “first times” risks being lost in time.

To prevent that from happening, the local community-based organization Stichting voor Dorpsontwikkeling Matawai has spent the last few years documenting their oral history storytelling traditions using video recorders and interactive maps. With support from the Amazon Conservation Team (ACT), the organization trained younger Matawai to record and interview their elders about the numerous named places and sites in their ancestral lands.

To date, the initiative has yielded over 17 hours of footage covering more than 150 historically significant places along the Saramacca River. For a number of the young Matawai involved in the project, it has brought them their first real opportunity to hear any oral history about their homelands.

For the Matawai elder Josef Dennert, the project made him realize that...

“...my inner wiseman had been sleeping all this time, but then I realized it was not too late. I had to follow them and finally apply my knowledge.”

The effort to document and preserve the community’s oral histories has led the Matawai to seek out support from a number of institutions—some very far



removed from their homelands. In September 2018, Dennert, along with two other Matawai, traveled to Washington, DC to research the papers of Edward C. Green at the Smithsonian Institution.

Green, an anthropologist, amassed a collection of field notes, photographs, and audio recordings captured during his time with the Matawai in the early 1970s—all of which were recently donated to the Smithsonian’s National Anthropological Archives.

Sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution’s Recovering Voices Program, the three Matawai researchers were able to access these invaluable historical materials for the first time, and were permitted to take back copies to share with the rest of their community.

At the end of the experience, basja (traditional leader) and research participant Tina Henkie reflected on the process: “These anthropologists wrote things down, while my people back then couldn’t write. But they told stories, and then the anthropologists recorded them. And now that the people aren’t with us anymore, we should be able to find the story somewhere. And that is what we’re doing now here at this archive; I try to imagine how my ancestors lived back then. And that gives me a feeling of pride to be a Matawai, because it helps me know my roots.”

To enable hosting of the recordings of oral histories, and linking of the histories to maps of the ancestral homelands, ACT collaborated with the mapping tech company Mapbox and Ruby for Good, a team of volunteer developers, together building a novel geostorytelling application called Terrastories.

The application interface consists of an interactive map and a sidebar with media content and stories. Using a content management system, the Matawai can add places and stories, and make decisions about designating certain stories as private or restricted. Terrastories works without internet access, and the code is open-source so that any community in the world can adapt it to map their own place-based oral history storytelling traditions.

In October 2018, in Paramaribo, Stichting voor Dorpsontwikkeling Matawai and ACT presented a version of Terrastories fully populated with all of the Matawai oral histories and maps before an audience of community members, traditional leaders, and Surinamese government officials. The project has spurred a national conversation around recognizing and protecting the Surinamese Afro-descendant culture as intangible cultural heritage.

The value of obtaining recognition as intangible cultural heritage would be immeasurable; especially with the Amazon rainforest increasingly at threat by skyrocketing deforestation and Brazil choosing to follow the lead of the United States by electing a climate change denying government in favor of abolishing indigenous lands.

As UNESCO observes,

“The importance of intangible cultural heritage is not [just] the cultural manifestation itself, but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next.”



Such knowledge often includes an understanding of the value of intact forest landscapes and how to successfully adapt to a changing environment—something that is essential for states to consider in their development of effective climate change policy.

Research has also demonstrated that storytelling empowers indigenous peoples to conserve their own environments. In essence, the continued cultural resilience of communities like the Matawai benefits us all.

Case Study 2: Kogui sacred sites and the 'línea negra' in Colombia

By Juana Londoño



When the indigenous peoples of Colombia's Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta region speak of their history, they use the term "Shibulama". The word conveys their traditional laws of origin, and their customs. It embraces stories from the past that teach them to live well in the present, and to become pure internally so that they may convey their messages with authority. The stories are transmitted to the children so that they learn and grow, discovering their role in their community and the meaning of their existence as members of their culture. The Sierra Nevada mamo (high priest) José Barros says that the purpose of history is to maintain knowledge so that the brain is not empty, and so that one learns to protect, care for and respect nature, and to find meaning in one's life.

When the Shibulama is referenced, these people know what is signified, even though the word has many senses and is broad. For example, how does one take care of the sacred spaces and sites? For them, that is achieved through an understanding of history, of knowing the Shibulama of that site. And what is the purpose of a particular history? It can be used for good or for bad purposes; that is why there is both positive and negative Shibulama....

...Over five centuries, places that the peoples of the Sierra perceive to carry the Shibulama have been lost; they are now possessed by others. For them, the loss of territory, and the sacred sites, means the simultaneous loss of knowledge and history. If their territory is lost, history is lost, and knowledge is lost. They say that history is not necessarily lost because there are no children who learn it, or because a mamo dies who did not transmit historical knowledge: the greatest risk is the loss of territory. The Shibulama has always or traditionally been transmitted and taught orally from generation to generation.

By participating in the ACT oral histories workshop, the peoples of the Sierra seek to learn how to use a tool from the "younger brother"—as they refer to the citizens of industrial society—to "record and store on a mobile phone" part of that Shibulama. They note that this does not mean that they are going to change the way they learn and receive the Shibulama. Why are they proceeding with the recording, then? They convey that they are doing so to communicate better with the younger brother, to transmit the stories they collect in the indigenous schools, and to spread the message of the mamos. Perhaps computers, tape recorders and mobile phones are very good tools, they say, but if the equipment is damaged, nothing remains. In contrast, history will always remain in the mind.

Luis Alimaco, a Kogui who is part of the Jaba Tañiwashkaka team, explains that the indigenous culture of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta has always been a culture with orally transmitted histories and traditions. Before, he says, the culture worked with only two "visions" (the physical, and the spiritual); now they work with four "visions", and one of these is technology. He describes that technology is a tool like an axe that, if it is used improperly, chops down many trees—that is why the peoples of the Sierra must always control and manage technology so that it does not turn against them. He notes that previously, it was not necessary to explain such things, because they were alone; now, it is required because other people have entered their territory. He feels that if his culture is to remain alive beyond our generation, the support of technology is necessary. Thus, he concludes, it is necessary to obtain clarity regarding the nature and purpose of technology.

Case Study 3: Waura spiritual landscapes in the Xingu, Brazil

By Antonio Peluso



In 2017, ACT began a pilot oral histories documentation initiative in Brazil with one specific indigenous partner community—the Waura of Ulupuene.

Background

Ulupuene is a small village of just less than 100 people that exists in the Upper Xingu region inside and along the borders of the protected Xingu Indigenous Park. ACT has a long history of working with indigenous peoples and culturally sensitive materials in the Xingu. This began with a multi-ethnic initiative to culturally map traditional lands of the indigenous groups inhabiting the region. ACT has continuously collaborated with the Waura community of Ulupuene since the village's creation in 2011, when we responded to Chief Eleukah's request for support to found this new village. Beyond cultural mapping, we continue to work with Ulupuene on projects focusing on education, territorial management, food security, and traditional knowledge preservation—most recently with a pilot oral histories initiative.

The severity of the deterioration of inter-generational knowledge transmission in the Xingu has become very apparent with recent deaths of significant indigenous elders, healers, and cultural practitioners who have taken their irretrievable and invaluable indigenous knowledge to the grave. The year 2017 was tumultuous with the loss of the chief of Piyulaga, the largest and principal Waura village. In Ulupuene, two elders and community leaders passed away: the regional "keeper of songs and dances," Yakuana, who took with him a vast wealth of knowledge about Waura cultural practices; and Aluakumá ("Big Bat"), a village elder, shaman, and healer. Both men were revered, and their kin expressed that they had lost more than just loved ones—they had lost an unrecoverable repository of cultural knowledge.

Yakuana was a principal figure in Ulupuene and the region, and was the brother of the chief who founded the village. He led dances and songs at the great ceremonies that bring villagers together from communities across the Xingu. Many of the most important ceremonies held in this region are reserved for the deaths of great leaders and chiefs. After the death of the chief of the principal Waura village in the summer of 2017, a yearlong planning process for his Kwarup ceremony began. Not long after, Yakuana fell ill and passed away. A burning question on some villagers' minds was "Who will lead the dances?" Some felt that Yakuana was the most knowledgeable dancer and song-keeper in the region, and that no one else could lead these integral rites of the ceremonies.

Some villagers thought that this alarming situation could begin to be addressed by the oral histories documentation project proposed by ACT. Recorded oral histories would offer an archive of the songs and dances that Yakuana's descendants could study for years to come.

Waura Oral Histories Initiative

ACT has filmed and recorded 12 pilot interviews with elders and members of the community recounting culturally significant stories, several of which were recorded at sacred sites. One of these interviews was with Aluakuma, the oldest man in Ulupuene and a shaman, who passed on in 2017. With him, he took untransmitted stories and knowledge. In his everyday activities, he could be found speaking softly to the spirits. Per his personal history, he gained his shamanic ability when he fell ill and the spirit of the bat—Alua—spoke to him for the first time. Just weeks before his passing, ACT filmed him during a trial for the oral histories initiative where he recounted his path to communication with the spirits, the derivation of his name, and his people's story of the origin of the world. The oral histories initiative has the potential to provide these recordings to Aluakuma's community and give indigenous knowledge a technological advantage in the face of influences that undermine traditional oral history transmission practices.

During this pilot initiative, ACT team members traveled with community members to a handful of sacred or culturally important sites. We filmed Chief Eleukah at the “Grandma’s house”, what appeared to be a small, dried-up, seasonal pond said to be the location of the house of a spirit. We filmed and recorded him recounting the story of the grandmother spirit to a group of young boys who had accompanied us on our hike.

Added urgency has been conveyed to the importance of recording and archiving indigenous heritage with the tragic vandalism of the sacred site of Kamukuaka. Kamukuaka is a cave that lies just outside of the protected indigenous territory and is adorned with sacred ancient carvings. For the Waura and other ethnic groups of the Xingu, the cave is the abode of the legendary warrior Kamukuaka, a mythological being that arose before the creation of the world, as well as of many other sacred spirits. The Waura used to inhabit the now deforested region near the cave until they fled because of the threats of cattle ranchers and farmers that were colonizing and clear-cutting the region. The Waura have long been positioned to reclaim this region and fight for governmental acknowledgment and demarcation, but in September 2018, the sacred carvings were completely destroyed. Vandals chipped away the engravings, leaving nothing but an exposed cave wall and forever destroying the stories that the Wauras’ ancestors had written in stone. Only a few months before they were destroyed and by a huge stroke of luck, ACT captured footage of four village elders recounting stories and explaining the significance of these engravings as part of the initial Waura oral histories documentation pilot. Through these recordings, the stories of the Wauras’ ancestors and the imagery of Kamukuaka’s engravings will live on in digital form. The importance of Kamukuaka to the indigenous people of the region cannot be understated, and...

...ACT’s proposed full-scale oral histories documentation initiative has the potential to mitigate these irrecoverable losses of indigenous culture and heritage.



All of these initial recordings were captured with a Zoom H4 digital audio recorder that was mounted upon a GorillaPod and either with a DSLR camera or on an iPhone on a standard tripod.

Since the pilot recordings, the community has expressed interest in continuing this initiative on several occasions. The next steps will be to conduct another field visit with the community to consult the community on the objectives they would like to accomplish with this project and to conduct a workshop in which ACT demonstrates how to operate the oral histories documentation equipment so that the community can develop the skills to digitally document their stories themselves.

