

IMPACT STORY

EMPATHEATRE

Changing Understandings
and Engagements with ocean
dependent communities:
Lalela uLwandle



"Our stories are the sacred medicine," *umuthi* "that ocean decision-making needs. Storytelling, and story-listening dissolves the barriers and disconnections between disciplines and departments", lead actress and co-director of Empatheatre **Mpume Mithombeni** says.



Photo: Jackie Bruniquel

In South Africa, acute tensions have arisen between pursuits to develop the blue economy, establish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), and sustain local livelihoods and cultures. Furthermore, the exclusion of small-scale fishers (SSF) and Indigenous peoples from ocean-related decision-making processes has heightened actual and potential conflicts.

"*Empatheatre*" is a methodology pioneered by a collective of artists and academics based at Rhodes University and the Durban University of Technology. It is a form of transdisciplinary and transgressive research that serves to convey and elicit empathy with the experiences of ocean-dependent people who are seldom heard or understood in the public domain. The methodology also serves as collaborative public storytelling praxis that can support public dialogue and participatory policy practices.

Art and research grounded in community experience

Lalela ulwandle (isiZulu for "Listen to the Sea") is a play co-produced by Hub researchers that conveys the complex realities of diverse communities involved socially,

economically, scientifically, and culturally with the ocean. The initial idea for the play was sparked by a 2018 public consultation meeting in Durban on potential exploratory oil and gas drilling off the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) coast, an area targeted by blue economy development. The South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) called a meeting between the Petroleum Agency of South Africa and community representatives from several small towns along the coastline. Although the government officials were sympathetic to some of the community representatives' arguments, the consultation process as a whole had the effect of reducing "the community" into one group either "for or against" development. There was not space in the process for the complex perspectives or deep knowledge that was in the room. Despite promises, the Agency did not organise a follow-up meeting, and the application for exploratory drilling licenses was approved by the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy.

This disappointing consultation prompted reflection by our Hub researchers on how diverse ways of knowing could actually be seen and respected in public consultations. They conducted seven months of social science research into the lives of citizens who live along the KZN coast, including groups of SSFs, traditional healers, civil society representatives, and marine scientists. The data was gathered through oral histories, interviews, focus group discussions, archival research, and collecting mythologies. These findings fed into a scripted play where fictional characters portray diverse hopes and concerns for the ocean.





Lalela ulwandle draws on the stories of three people played by Mpume Mthombeni, Rory Booth and Alison Cassels

Portraying power and exclusion in South Africa

Lalela ulwandle draws on the stories of three people: Nolwandle is a marine educator whose mother is a Zionist and grandmother a sangoma (a traditional healer); Niren is a young environmental activist whose family has a long history of seine-net fishing; and Faye is a retired marine biologist reflecting on her life as a scientist and activist. Audience members sit in a circle with the actors and witness these intergenerational stories. The actors recount how the ocean is linked to livelihoods, medicine and healing, scientific study, spiritual connections with ancestors, and more.

The play deals with acts of past and present power and exclusion in South Africa. It performs the painful experiences of forced removals under apartheid. It explores how industrial fishing and extractive mining on land and sea continue to create forms of oppression and exclusion. It also highlights the tensions between environmental justice and environmental conservation that are frequently played out in real life when local people are restricted from accessing sites of heritage and livelihood in Marine Protected Areas. Over time, the play has evolved. We have used a “call and response” approach to iterative research co-design inspired by African singing traditions: community representatives collaborate in

The play illustrates the painful experiences of forced removals under apartheid.

reviewing various drafts of the play, confirming the accuracy of the research findings and making further suggestions. Such a process allows for ongoing ethical engagement between researchers and community representatives.

The performances support collaborative examination of research findings with diverse publics, including local community members as well as members of other coastal communities, researchers, civil society representatives, and decision makers. After each performance, Hub researchers facilitate a discussion, involving the audience in identifying the play’s implications in relation to their own lived experiences. This is a far cry from the usual public debates where both the speaker and the audience are already primed to take a stand for or against a position. We’ve seen how

the storytelling of *Lalela ulwandle* seems to enable listening that makes allowance for ambiguity, complexity, and plurality. Critical debate happens in these post-performance discussions, but with respect for divergent views.

Reaching communities

Through a six-town tour in 2020, live performances attracted 747 participants, of whom approximately 56% were women. Media impact (print, online, and broadcast) reached over one million people, broadening public dialogue around





ocean decision-making on the KZN coastline. Recurrent themes of the post-performance discussions included exclusion of communities from decision making and pressures on the ocean arising from South Africa’s national fisheries policy and its blue economy plan, termed ‘Operation Phakisa’ (which means ‘hurry up’ in Sesotho).

In 2022, *Lalela uLwandle* ran again as a theatre play in Durban, the Eastern Cape, and for the first time in Cape Town. This second tour included a new aspect: we performed at national strategic workshops that brought together fishers from across the coastline and civil society actors including NGOs, researchers, and lawyers.

The production offered a space for fishers to express their hurt and pain from the apartheid past and how they feel this past still shapes their present. This provided an additional layer of support for and solidarity with SSFs by offering an opportunity to collectively acknowledge grief and ensure collective learning to avoid repeating past mistakes and injustices. We felt this was necessary to avoid the implicit expectation that communities must “forgive and forget” as a condition to enter into or maintain partnerships .

During the 2022 tour, many SSFs and communities were publicly opposing new applications for seismic surveys to prospect for oil and gas along the South Coastline. Performing *Lalela uLwandle* within this context enabled public processing of recent events and provided opportunities for connection.

Coastal communities and fishers found allyship with scientists who shared their concerns for protecting ocean ecosystems. Community representatives used the post-performance discussion to directly ask questions to scientists, policy makers, and government officials who they had previously attempted to contact without success.

And members of the public who attended *Lalela uLwandle* were better able to understand how such environmental struggles are also struggles for human rights and justice.

Lalela uLwandle won the 2022 Bertha Activism Award, which provided funding and expanded networks to support the production of *Umkhosi Wenala* (see accompanying case study). In March 2023, Empatheatre won the Fleur du Cap, South Africa’s most prestigious theatre award, for innovation in theatre for the *Lalela uLwandle* production.

IMPACT!
Through media we reached over one million people, broadening public dialogue around ocean decision-making.

At the post-show discussion, community members could ask direct questions to decision-makers who they had previously attempted to contact without success.

National impacts

Following its blue economy agenda, South Africa has prioritised economic exploitation of the ocean through industrial aquaculture, oil and gas exploration, and transport





Through a six-town tour in 2020, live performances attracted 747 participants.

Photos: Casey Pratt

(Sunde, 2022). The inadequacies of current environmental impact assessment (EIA) processes for these initiatives are captured in the latest iteration of *Lalela uLwandle*. In particular, the play shows how both tangible and intangible heritage should be taken into consideration in EIA processes related to the ocean.

Using the play as evidence in courts of law

Like a call and response, *Lalela uLwandle* has now been used as evidence in the courts of law to appeal Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) results. The disappointing 2018 public consultation meeting that initially inspired the play had ended with the approval of exploratory drilling. These licenses were then appealed by SDCEA and local legal NGO Natural Justice, with support from the Coastal Justice Network (CJN), a Hub-affiliated broad network of SSF leaders, environmental justice organisations, and researchers along South Africa's coast. The range of evidence that emerged from the play's tour allowed us to gather expert views from a

range of disciplines (fisheries, marine ecology, heritage, international human rights law, and international investment law) to offer integrated evidence to support community views. Feedback from the play was used to highlight the communities' intangible heritage of and emotional and spiritual connections with the ocean. Although the appeal was unsuccessful, the developers subsequently withdrew their bid to drill. It seems likely that the resistance offered by the region played some part in this decision.

The play has since been used to support successful appeals to licenses for offshore oil and gas exploration through seismic surveys, which negatively affect marine life and the livelihoods and culture of coastal fishing communities. Exploration rights on the Wild Coast granted to Shell and Impact Africa were successfully contested on the grounds of inadequate consultation with communities and failure to consider their impacts on those communities, including to intangible culture.

The legal affidavits included evidence from the Hub's marine and social sciences research as well as the voices of communities captured through script co-development and audience participation in *Lalela uLwandle*.

Exploration rights on the Wild Coast granted to Shell and Impact Africa were successfully contested on the grounds of inadequate consultation with communities.





Photo: Dylan McGarry



The One Ocean Hub was invited by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change's Paris Committee to showcase 'Lalela uLwandle' at the UN Climate Summit (COP27) in Egypt in 2022.

A first interdict in December 2021 represented a key victory for the community, with the judiciary relying on Hub artistic outputs to evidence intangible cultural heritage that had been disregarded in previous consultations on ocean use. A judgement in September 2022 was widely reported in international media for its historical importance in recognising: 1) the crucial role of coastal communities as ocean custodians, including at the ocean-climate nexus; 2) the sacred nature of this relationship in terms of cultural human rights; and 3) the need to protect the participatory rights of these communities in environmental impact assessments and decision making on the ocean.

On the whole, *Lalela uLwandle* has been relied on as evidence in court, adding to the affidavits of SSFs and ocean defenders. While the 2022 judgement is under appeal, for the moment seismic surveys have been effectively halted in South African waters. This is the first time that art and theatre have been used as evidence to embody intangible heritage of our oceans in South African courts. It has established a new legal precedent: the South African judiciary recognises the sacred relationship of the ocean as a realm for the ancestors. This opens up the role that art can play in supporting Indigenous knowledge in national and international jurisprudence.

International influence

Though grounded in South African experiences, the inter-generational stories of the sea performed in *Lalela uLwandle* have resonated strongly with a variety of international audiences, from undergraduate students to international environmental negotiators.

During the global pandemic, we reached audiences by turning *Lalela uLwandle* into a radio play, accompanied by a documentary and an animation exploring research with traditional healers. These new art works and related research findings were shared internationally through webinars for World Oceans Week in 2020 and 2021. They also found their way through global networks to unexpected spaces, such as the course "Global Literature of Environmental Justice" at the University of Central Florida. Professor of English **Dr. Kevin Meehan** has based a module of that course on the play, introducing students to the concept of intangible cultural heritage and exploring how empathatre compares with other literary forms.

Empatatre methodology and *Lalela uLwandle* have been particularly well received in UN spaces of negotiation and learning. While the UN system acknowledges the value of Indigenous and traditional knowledge of natural resource management, incorporating such knowledge into international governance has proven greatly challenging. As Erwin et al. (2022, p. 384) explain, "This challenge lies not only in ensuring inclusion, but in recognising existing power relations between ocean epistemologies in which some ways of knowing, such as science and economics, dominate policy and decision-making forums."

IMPACT!
The South African judiciary recognises the sacred relationship of the ocean as a realm for the ancestors

Feedback from performances of *Lalela uLwandle* at major UN events show that art can create space for other ways of knowing, even in such forums. In November 2022, the play



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Photos: Jackie Brühnel

was performed live at the UN Climate COP27 Capacity Building Hub in Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt. A delegate commented that the experience of the play was radically different from the usual COP side-events where research is shared with negotiators: "Five-minute sound bites are offered in a flurry and cascade of moderated panels. Instead, the play offered an opportunity to immerse oneself in a contextual experience ...feeling [communities'] problems, not just rationalising them."

The performance also resonated with activists. A youth representative who found the play deeply moving and affirming reflected that "powerful storytelling can offer a richer and more empathetic approach to advocacy and decision-making." The moderators of the



Victory! Taryn Parera in court in South Africa

Photo: Taryn Pereria

"There's no room for people to talk about yesterday; they are only concerned with now. The play gives an opportunity ...to really listen."

Anonamous human rights lawyer

Capacity-Building Hub said the Empatheatre performance felt like the "most important experience they had" at COP27.

In March 2023, the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) invited the Hub to perform *Lalela ulwandle* live in Rome for the high-level closing of the International Year of Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYAFA). The performance demonstrated to FAO officers and representatives of governments and civil society the potential of art-based approaches to convey both the inseparability of SSFs'

human rights and the need to address those rights in a coherent manner. (These are the key policy messages of a [joint policy brief](#) co-developed by the Hub, FAO, and the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.) A human rights lawyer reflected in response:

"One thing that I thought was really powerful is the way in which it created a space to really listen to what people are wanting to say. It sounds simple, but in policy spaces the communication is directive. There's no room for people to talk about yesterday; they are only concerned with Now. There's no room for people to talk about injustices and their personal connections. There's no room for complexity ...Here, it gives an opportunity to get to that space to really listen."





Photos: Neil Coppen



The play Umkhosi Wenala is co-written by 13 young performers/activists from the Mbazwana Arts Centre.

Next steps: more research, art, and action

As part of the empatheatre methodology, each performance is followed by a facilitated public discussion with researchers, performers, decision makers, and the audience on the themes emerging from the play. At all performances, a short feedback form is completed by the audience asking how the play made them feel, whether there were any characters in the play they related to and why, and how we should make decisions about the oceans. We now have audience feedback data spanning three years of performances: 875 forms in total.

As of 2023, a post-doctoral researcher has been brought on to research the development impacts of *Lalela uLwandle*. They will analyse the collected data and carry out interviews with a wide range of stakeholders who have been involved and impacted by the production. In addition, the post-performance discussions of *Lalela uLwandle* have helped us identify new interdisciplinary research questions around inclusiveness and benefit-sharing in the establishment of Marine Protected Areas and the potential role for intangible cultural heritage in legal decisions on the ocean.

They have also provided the groundwork for a new production, Umkhosi Wenala. Co-written by 13 young performers/activists from the Mbazwana Arts Centre, this play aims to create an innovative participatory decision-making space where rural youth can have a voice in the creation and management of Marine Protective Areas (see accompanying case study). The voices of Indigenous peoples, small-scale fishing communities, women, and young people are often overlooked in ocean policy forums on climate change adaptation and blue economy initiatives.

Indeed, people across the planet share experiences of exclusion from decision-making processes, concerns around the exploitation of natural resources and marine protection, and questions of how to include cultural heritage in policy spaces. *Lalela uLwandle* has created opportunities for public conversations on how cultural, scientific, and conservation knowledges may find strategic alignment if people learn to listen to each other carefully. It draws attention to the necessity for decision making processes to take into consideration the many meanings – symbolic, religious, cultural, and economic – that humans construct in relation to the ocean.

Key publications:

K Erwin, T Pereira, D McGarry, and N Coppen. *Lalela Ulwandle: An experiment in plural governance discussions*, in Rose Bosewell et al. (ed), *The Palgrave Handbook of Blue Heritage* (Palgrave, 2022), 383-409.

T. Pereira, “‘The court has a duty to step in and protect those who are offended and the environment’: *Judge rules in the Shell Seismic Survey case in October 2022*” (2022),

Key media coverage from COP27:

[“One ocean: the power of storytelling at COP27”](#), 27 February 2023.

[“Cop27 bulletin: Waiting for a sign from Bali,”](#) 16 November 2022.

[“Cycle power and gender rights: days eight and nine at Cop27 – in pictures,”](#) 15-16 November 2022.

