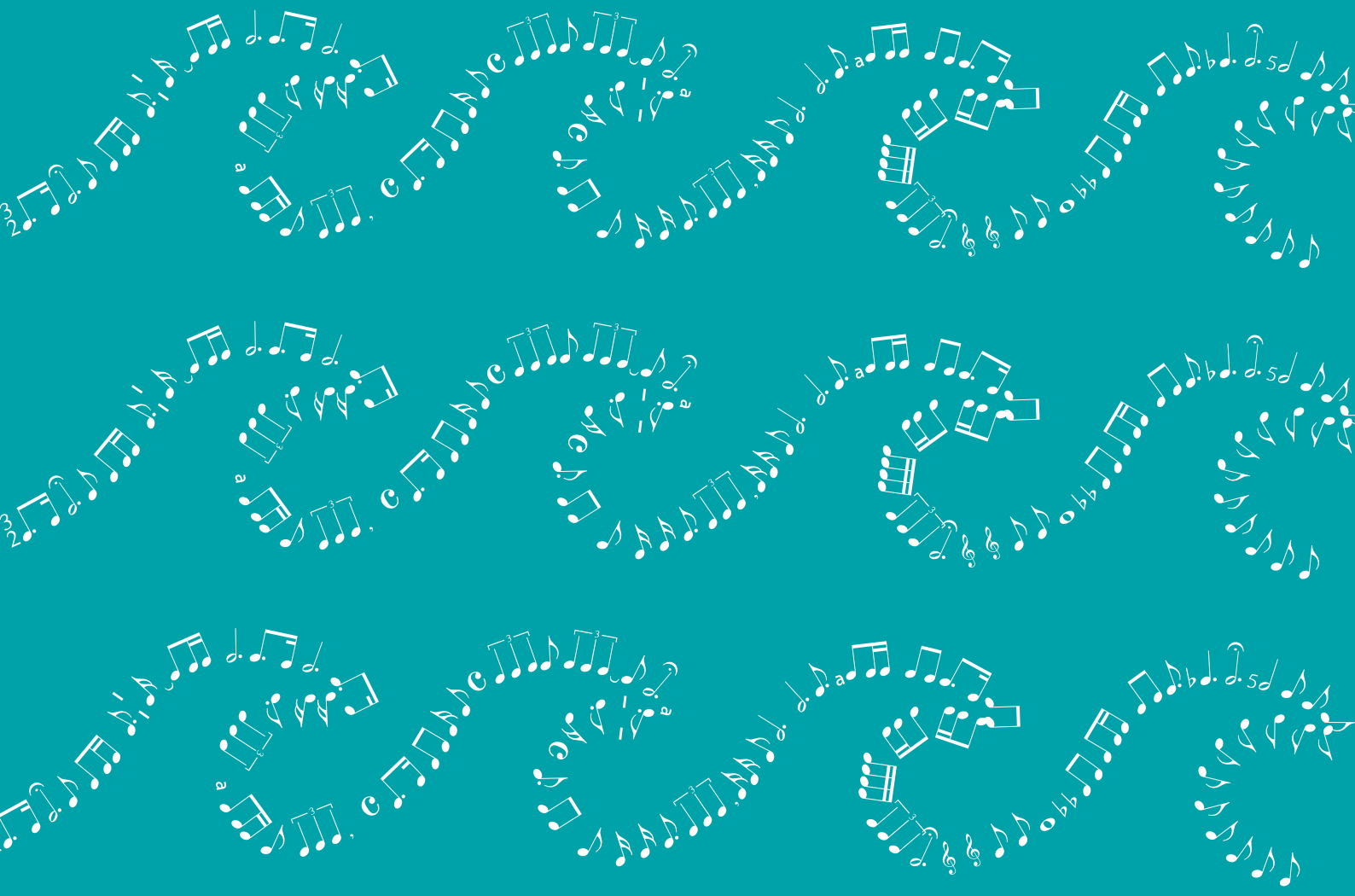


IMPACT STORY

Hub Engagement in Ghana:
Sharing Unique Practices
and Perspectives Through
Documentary Filmmaking



Cocooned in Harmony' film displays a rich culture in which knowledge systems are developed and maintained through music. While the small-scale fisher's songs don't use the language of the Sustainable Development Goals or global ocean governance, the songs convey an active engagement with the same themes and issues.

Photo: Film screenshot



Small-scale fishers (SSFs) are responsible for over 70% of fish landings in Ghana, but they are rarely consulted or included in fisheries decision-making processes at the national or global levels. Conventional approaches to marine science and management only allow space for a narrow range of knowledges and accompanying perspectives. This leaves little room for the expertise and experiences of many people with unique connections to the sea.

The Hub's Deep Emotional Engagement Programme (DEEP) seeks to bring these voices into national and global debates about ocean governance. DEEP funding provides support to community-based art projects that explore emotional attachments to the sea.

A unique opportunity

Dr. **Eric Debrah Otchere** has conducted research with Ghanaian coastal fishing communities since 2015, documenting their music, exploring themes of migration and identity. When the One Ocean Hub put out a call for initiatives to explore emotional connections with the ocean, Dr Otchere, the Head of the Department of Music

and Dance at Ghana's University of Cape Coast, saw an opportunity to engage with these communities in a new way.

The song lyrics of Ghanaian fishers address issues such as poverty and hardship resulting from injustice and corruption, belief in gods and alternative worlds, kin networks, and gender relations. Through song, fishers communicate their views on sensitive social and political issues, such as illegal overfishing by industrial trawlers and fish stocks on the verge of collapse.

Dr. Otchere envisioned a documentary that would focus on these songs: "Although I had published a couple of papers based on different aspects of their music, I did not feel quite satisfied in terms of sharing their stories on a bigger platform and in a way that is readily accessible. With the support I received from the One Ocean Hub, I provided a platform through the documentary to get the fishers to tell their own story as it manifests through their songs to the wider world."

The documentary film provided a platform for the fishers to tell their own story as it manifests through their songs to the wider world.

Dr. **Eric Debrah Otchere**
Head of the Department of Music and Dance
at Ghana's University of Cape Coast





The small-scale fisher's songs discuss issues of identity, power/ inequality, agency, gender, and emotional connections to the ocean. Photos: Eric Debrah Othere



Building on trust

Dr. Othere had already worked with three fishing communities to build an archive of traditional music, bringing groups of fisherfolk into the University to record over 500 songs. By paying for their transport and associated costs and sending them back with copies of the recordings, he had shown that the University wasn't merely extractive. The fishers saw that the University was helping them to preserve their knowledge.

DEEP funding enabled him to expand these connections: he went from working with three coastal communities to more than 20, reaching all four major geopolitical regions along Ghana's coast. The documentary film captures the songs of fishers from the Volta, Greater Accra, Central, and Western regions.

IMPACT!

Cocooned in Harmony has been shown twice on TV in Ghana. It has been meaningful for the small-scale fishers to see their concerns expressed on national TV.

The documentary displays the wealth of traditional knowledge systems on ocean governance in these communities – from taboos to songs of healthy practices.

The documentary was produced using participatory storytelling approaches. Recorded songs were played back to cohorts of fishers, and together they wrote out the lyrics (most of the songs employ 'fishers' tongue' which is difficult for those

outside of their clique to understand). Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were then held to discuss the songs' meanings. The research team and SSFs determined the documentary's content together, sometimes cutting footage or substituting visuals as directed by community members. After the initial cuts, the documentarians held screenings with groups of fishers to get their endorsement before filming the narration and other voices of non-fishers.

Cocooned in Harmony

The result of this careful process is the 45-minute film Cocooned in Harmony: Power, Agency and Multiple Realities in the Songs of Indigenous Ghanaian Seine Fisherfolk. The documentary is organised in three parts: the use to which the music is put (what the music does), distinctive characteristics of the music (what the music is), and the content of the lyrics (what the music says).

The songs help fishers coordinate their activities, but they do more than 'merely' providing accompaniment to difficult fishing routines. The songs discuss issues of identity, power/ inequality, agency, gender, and emotional connections to the ocean. They create mental, artistic, and emotional spaces

Two community screenings were held in partnership with Arts Untold. The events included ocean-related art activities for children in the daytime and then, once the sun had set, documentary viewings on the beach.



– expressing worldviews, encoding histories, airing views on sensitive issues, and nurturing spontaneous creativity.

The simple structure of the songs encourages as much participation as possible without prior rehearsal. Because the songs are deployed in the context of collective, coordinated activity, timing and rhythm are key features. Perhaps the most apparent and ubiquitous style of the fishing songs is their tendency to be antiphonal, employing both call-and-response as well as cantor-and-chorus styles.

The documentary displays the wealth of traditional knowledge systems on ocean governance in these communities – from taboos to songs of healthy practices. The songs often create multi-vocalic texts with different possible interpretations. This is an important resistance strategy; in the rare case singers are challenged over a song’s lyrics, they can repudiate or deny any meanings that might cause inconvenience, embarrassment, or even serious political complications.

Cocooned in Harmony displays a rich, culture in which knowledge systems are developed and maintained through music. While they do not use the language of the Sustainable Development Goals or global ocean governance, these SSF communities shows active engagement with the same themes and issues.

Casting nets: dissemination among fishing communities and beyond

The documentary was translated into two dominant local languages (Fante and Éwé), so that it can be understood

by all of the communities involved in its production. Two community screenings were held in partnership with Arts Untold. The events included ocean-related art activities for children in the daytime and then, once the sun had set, documentary viewings on the beach.

Copies of the video have also been shared with local leaders, who have held their own screenings. Further, the documentary has been shown twice now on Ghanaian national TV. It has also been screened at the University of Cape Coast as part of the Pan-African Society for Musical Arts Education conference and will be part of the upcoming Chale Wote arts festival in Accra.

In addition to being publicly available on YouTube, screenings of *Cocooned in Harmony* have been held around the world, including the Royal Conservatory of Music in Aarhus, Denmark, the Glasgow Centre for Contemporary Arts and the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland, Zeppelin University in Germany, and as part of the Bayimba Festival of the Arts in Uganda.

IMPACT!
Artisanal fishers translated Hub research findings into song lyrics. The songs that reflect overfishing, climate change and pollution have been taken back to fishing communities who are now singing them.

Ripples of impact

Dr. Otchere says the fishing communities featured in the documentary have found the experience “heart-warming and morale-boosting.” It has been meaningful to see their concerns expressed on national TV, in their own words. And the experience has further strengthened their relationships with the University, so that they are willing to share more and collaborate further.

Already another Hub collaboration has happened. Artisanal fishers came to the University for a workshop to translate Hub research findings into song lyrics. Over three days, the



The screening events in Ghana included ocean-related art activities for children in the daytime and then, once the sun had set, documentary viewing on the beach.

fishers composed 43 songs. The result is Nyansapo (Wisdom Knot), a carefully crafted medley of songs reflecting issues such as overfishing, climate change, and pollution. The lyricists have taken the new songs back to their fishing communities which have started to sing them. Together with researchers, they plan to track the spread of these new songs. A follow-up documentary, Cocooned 2.0, is in production based on this project, and the songs have already travelled internationally as part of a Hub exhibition at the Glasgow Centre for Contemporary Arts.

The documentary is also inspiring yet more art and scholarship from others. The famous Fringe Ensemble in Bonn, Germany is producing a stage play based on Cocooned, expanding some of its themes and involving local fishers on stage, side-by-side with professional actors. The documentary has inspired student projects at Zeppelin University in Friedrichshafen, Germany as well as a PhD thesis proposal by one of the production research assistants.

Effective ocean governance requires fairer and more respectful relationships with those living and working on our oceans' coasts. Hub Director Prof. **Elisa Morgera** sees a connection between art and governance: "Art and creativity are powerful ways to raise awareness of the many different and distinctive relationships that people have with the sea, which need to be front and centre in planning a sustainable future for the world's oceans."

Cocooned in Harmony demonstrates how thoughtful filmmaking can bring a community's vibrant, adaptive indigenous knowledge system to a global audience.

Publications

1. Cocooned in Harmony: Power, Agency and Multiple Realities in the Songs of Indigenous Ghanaian Seine Fisherfolk (2022).
2. E. D. Otchere, "Voices of men in the margins: A stylistic analysis of fishing songs in Cape Coast, Ghana" (forthcoming, journal TBD).
3. E. D. Otchere, "On subversion: A critical analysis of gender reversals and the utopia of hegemonic masculinities in fishing songs" (forthcoming, journal TBD).



Film director, Dr Eric Debrah Otchere and Deep Fund project manager Dr Lisa McDonald at the Centre for Contemporary Arts Centre during the Q&A after the film screening in Glasgow (UK) in 2023. Photo: Laura Merilainen

