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Echoes of Coffee Economy: Sound Place Storytelling as an Aural Heritage in Kilimanjaro's Coffee Economy (1880s–2025)

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Abstract
Kilimanjaro's coffee economy provides a valuable lens through which to examine Tanzania's historical engagement with global systems. From German colonial rule in Tanzania plantations to British colonial rule in Tanzania cooperative structures and, more recently, contemporary fair-trade markets, coffee production has significantly shaped the region's economy, social relations, and international connections. This paper builds insights from a Sound-Walk-Storytelling workshop organized by the AfDevLives Project and draws on qualitative fieldwork, including interviews and informal conversations, to interpret auditory experiences associated with the coffee economy. By engaging with diverse soundscapes across farms, Agricultural Marketing Cooperative Societies (AMCOS), curing factories, and transport networks, the study traces the socio-economic transformations of the region. Using sound mapping, oral histories, and participatory audio walks, the paper argues that coffee functions not merely as an agricultural commodity but as a repository of memory, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. In doing so, it contributes to historiography, heritage conservation, and a deeper understanding of global local linkages within Tanzanian history.

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Introduction

Kilimanjaro Region occupies a distinctive position in the economic, cultural, and historical landscape of Tanzania. For more than a century, coffee production has served as a central pillar of the region's engagement with the wider world. Introduced during the late nineteenth century under German colonial rule and subsequently reorganized through British cooperative systems, coffee cultivation transformed Kilimanjaro into an internationally connected economic space (Coulson, 2013; Iliffe, 1979). Beyond its economic value, coffee has shaped social relations, labour organization, and

patterns of cultural exchange, linking local communities to global markets and transnational networks (Kimambo, 1991; Ponte, 2002).

Existing scholarship on Tanzania's coffee economy has largely focused on production systems, policy transformations, and market dynamics, often overlooking the sensory and intangible dimensions of this history. Yet, the sounds associated with coffee production and trade from plantation harvesting and factory processing to cooperative meetings and auction activities offer a rich but underexplored archive of historical experience. These soundscapes reflect technological changes, shifts in labour relations, and the enduring presence of international actors in the region, including German, British, and later global market influences. As scholars of sound and sensory experience suggest, acoustic environments are socially constructed and deeply embedded in historical and spatial contexts (Schafer, 1994; Pink, 2015).

This paper introduces Sound–Place–Storytelling (SPS) as an innovative methodological approach to documenting the aural heritage of Kilimanjaro's coffee economy. By capturing and interpreting the acoustic environments of key production and marketing sites, the study constructs an alternative historical narrative grounded in lived experience and sensory perception. Through sound mapping, oral histories, and participatory engagement, the research highlights how everyday sounds can function as historical evidence, revealing connections between local practices and broader international processes (Saunders & Moles, 2016). In doing so, the paper argues that aural heritage constitutes a vital yet neglected dimension of Tanzania's historiography, offering new insights into the relationship between economy, culture, and global interaction, as well as contributing to wider debates on intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

Historical Background of Coffee Economy in Kilimanjaro Region

Early Introduction and German Colonial Era (1880s–1918)

Coffee was introduced to the Kilimanjaro region in the late nineteenth century by missionaries of the Holy Ghost Fathers from Germany, who successfully planted it at Kilema Mission in 1889 after earlier unsuccessful attempts in Bagamoyo along the coast (Millinga, Wilson & Kesi, 2008). The favourable climatic conditions and fertile volcanic soils of the Kilimanjaro highlands enabled the crop to thrive, leading to its gradual spread to surrounding areas such as Ugweno in Mwanga District following the consolidation of German colonial rule in German East Africa around 1900 (Kimambo, 1991).

During the German colonial period, coffee cultivation expanded rapidly and became a central component of the colonial export economy. Large estates were established by European settlers, while African smallholders were increasingly incorporated into the system through taxation policies, labour demands, and indirect forms of coercion (Iliffe, 1979). This dual system of estate and smallholder production not only altered traditional agricultural practices but also restructured local economies and social relations. German planters introduced improved coffee varieties, modern processing techniques, and organized export systems that linked Kilimanjaro directly to European markets. The construction of the Tanga Moshi railway further strengthened this connection, facilitating efficient transport of coffee to coastal ports for export.

This period marked a significant transformation not only in economic organization but also in the sensory environment of the region. The steady rhythms of plantation labour, the mechanical sounds of early pulping machines, and the noise of steam locomotives became defining features of a new industrial soundscape. These sounds symbolized the integration of Kilimanjaro into global capitalist systems and the emergence of a colonial economy oriented toward external markets.

British Colonial Era and Cooperative Marketing (1919–1961)

Following the end of the First World War, Tanganyika came under British administration, bringing about important institutional and structural changes in the coffee sector. The British introduced cooperative systems as a means of organizing African producers, most notably through the Kilimanjaro Native Planters Association (KNPA), which later evolved into the Kilimanjaro Native Cooperative Union (KNCU) (Coulson, 2013). These institutions aimed to provide African farmers with access to markets, credit, and agricultural inputs, while at the same time maintaining a level of colonial oversight and control over production and pricing.

The cooperative movement significantly expanded smallholder participation, particularly among the Chagga communities, who became highly successful coffee producers. Coffee cultivation increasingly became embedded within household economies, contributing to improvements in income, education, and local infrastructure. At the same time, the cooperative system facilitated the development of more structured marketing channels, including centralized auctions and export arrangements, thereby deepening Kilimanjaro's integration into international trade networks, especially with Britain and other European markets.

The soundscape of this period reflected these institutional transformations. Cooperative meetings were characterized by discussion, negotiation, and decision-making processes, while auction floors in Moshi introduced new forms of commercial interaction marked by voices, transactions, and movement. Transport networks expanded, bringing with them the sounds of vehicles, loading activities, and increased human mobility. These acoustic environments illustrate a shift from purely plantation-based production to a more complex, organized, and participatory economic system.

Post-Independence Era to the Present (1961–2025)

Following independence in 1961, coffee remained one of Tanzania's most important export commodities and continued to play a central role in the national and regional economy. The government adopted Ujamaa policies, emphasizing collective production, state intervention, and rural development. These policies restructured cooperative systems and aimed to promote equitable distribution of resources, although they also introduced challenges related to efficiency, management, and market responsiveness (Coulson, 2013).

From the 1980s onwards, structural adjustment programs and economic liberalization led to further transformations in the coffee sector. Market reforms allowed for greater participation of private actors and increased competition, while global price fluctuations and changing trade conditions affected production patterns and farmer incomes (Ponte, 2002). Despite these challenges, institutions such as the Tanzania Coffee Board and the Moshi Coffee Auction have continued to connect Kilimanjaro's coffee producers to global markets, linking the region to buyers across Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and North America.

In recent decades, the coffee economy has also become closely associated with cultural heritage and tourism. Coffee tours, farm visits, and experiential activities have emerged as important components of the local economy, allowing visitors to engage with the history, culture, and production processes of coffee. This has added a new dimension to the industry, where economic activity intersects with heritage preservation and cultural representation.

The soundscape of the contemporary coffee economy reflects both continuity and transformation. While mechanization has reduced some of the labour-intensive sounds of earlier periods, new acoustic elements have emerged through modern processing technologies, transportation systems, and tourism activities. In some spaces, however, the diminishing intensity of sound particularly in formerly vibrant industrial sites suggests broader economic shifts and the gradual decline of certain traditional structures. Thus, the changing soundscape provides a valuable lens through which to understand the evolving dynamics of Kilimanjaro's coffee economy over time.

Sound–Place–Storytelling: A Case of the Tanzania Coffee Curing Company (TCCCo) Factory

Sound

Coffee curing is a post-harvest process that transforms parchment coffee into clean, green, and export-ready beans through a series of stages including cleaning, drying, hulling, polishing, grading, sorting, and quality inspection. This process ensures that the beans are free of husks and parchment and are suitable for roasting or further processing into soluble or ground coffee. Historically, a curing plant was established in Moshi in 1920 by a German investor, Heins Bueb (tccc.co.tz). The facility was later nationalized in 1971 and placed under the Coffee Authority of Tanzania, subsequently the Tanzania Coffee Marketing Board, and is currently managed under the Tanzania Coffee Board (TCB, 2012).

The acoustic environment of the factory has undergone significant transformation over time. During the colonial and early post-independence periods, the space was characterized by the thunder of heavy machinery, the clanging of metal rollers, and the continuous hum of conveyor systems transporting beans through different stages of processing. Outside the factory, ox carts creaked under heavy loads, while workers communicated in Kiswahili, German, and English, reflecting the layered colonial and international presence embedded within the industry.

At its peak in the post-independence era, the factory resonated with intense industrial activity. Engines roared, coffee sacks were dropped and dragged across the floors, and the sharp whistle of foremen structured the rhythm of labour within a workforce that once ranged between 6,000 and 12,000 workers. In contrast, the present soundscape is marked by a striking quietness. Only the subdued footsteps of approximately 20 workers, the low hum of a single operational machine, and occasional birdsong filtering through broken windows define the current acoustic environment. This absence of sound is itself meaningful, reflecting not only reduced industrial activity but also broader economic transitions and decline. The Tanzania Coffee Curing Company (TCCCo) factory in Moshi is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Tanzania Coffee Curing Company (TCCCo) factory in Moshi, located at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro Tanzania. Note: The abbreviation TCCCo is used consistently in this study, although some sources refer to the institution as TCCCLtd. The industrial architecture and surrounding landscape are interpreted as reflecting its former role in large scale coffee processing. Photograph by a VUASU accountant, used with permission.

Place

The TCCCo factory stands as a monumental industrial structure, its expansive brick architecture and towering silos forming a prominent landmark in Moshi since the colonial period. Strategically located at the foot of Mount Kilimanjaro and surrounded by coffee-growing areas, the factory once occupied a central position in regional production and trade networks. It functioned as a hub of economic activity, attracting labour, facilitating innovation, and connecting local producers to international markets.

Over time, however, global market fluctuations, mechanization, policy changes, and increased competition have reshaped the significance of this place. What was once a vibrant centre of industrial production has gradually transitioned into a largely underutilized space. Despite its physical endurance, the factory now embodies a sense of partial abandonment, where the built environment remains intact, but its socio-economic vitality has diminished. The site thus represents both continuity and loss, serving as a material reminder of past industrial prominence.

Storytelling

The historical narrative of the Moshi Coffee Curing Factory is deeply intertwined with the broader trajectory of the coffee economy in northern Tanzania. When its foundation was laid in the early twentieth century, the factory symbolized progress, industrialization, and economic promise under colonial rule. For decades, it stood as a centre of employment and productivity, where the sounds of grinding, sorting, and bagging coffee beans defined the daily life of the town. The movement of workers through the streets of Moshi, the aroma of drying coffee, and the continuous mechanical rhythms collectively formed the sensory identity of the area.

By the 1970s, the factory had reached its peak, processing coffee from across northern Tanzania and employing thousands of workers during high production seasons. It was not merely a site of production but also a social and economic anchor for the community. However, contemporary observations reveal a stark contrast. The once vibrant halls now echo with silence, and the reduced workforce operates within a space that no longer reflects its former intensity.

This transformation is captured vividly in oral accounts, where former and current workers describe the factory as a place of both memory and endurance. In an informal conversation in Moshi on 30 July 2025, a participant described the factory as now largely quiet compared to its earlier period of operation. This observation can be understood as reflecting changes in economic conditions, industrial decline, and ongoing engagement with the site. In this sense, the factory's soundscape past and present serves as a powerful medium for understanding the historical and emotional dimensions of Kilimanjaro's coffee economy.

Sound Place Storytelling: A Case of the VUASU Co-operative Union (VCU)

Sound

The historical development of the VUASU Co-operative Union reflects the broader trajectory of cooperative movements in Tanzania. The Wapare Union was initially registered as a society on 21st September 1956 under Registration Certificate No. 1269, with the objective of coordinating cooperative societies across the Pare District (TNA Acc. 548). This institutional foundation was further strengthened with the formal establishment of the VUASU Co-operative Union (VCU) on 4th May 1961 (Lukwaro, 1976). Following the abolition of Agricultural Marketing Cooperative Societies (AMCOS) in 1976 and their subsequent revival under the Cooperative Act No. 14 of 1982, VUASU was re-registered on 4th March 1984, marking a renewed phase of cooperative activity in the region.

In its formative and peak years, the acoustic environment of VUASU was vibrant and dynamic, reflecting its central role in the rural economy. Early mornings were marked by the rumble of tractors and the movement of goods, while the loading of iron sheets and agricultural inputs onto trucks produced a steady clatter that resonated across the compound. Inside the administrative offices, the rhythmic stamping of documents, the ringing of telephones, and the mechanical clicking of

typewriters signaled a highly active bureaucratic system facilitating loans, subsidies, and farmer services. Market days introduced an additional layer of sound, with vendors calling out prices, livestock noises blending into the background, and the reversing signals of lorries punctuating the busy environment.

Such soundscapes were not incidental; they embodied the functioning of a cooperative economy that connected farmers to markets, credit systems, and state-supported development initiatives (Coulson, 2013). However, contemporary observations reveal a stark contrast. The once lively acoustic environment has largely faded, replaced by silence. The wind passing through deteriorating structures, the creaking of rusted equipment, and the occasional footsteps of a few staff members now dominate the space. This transformation in sound reflects broader socio-economic shifts, including the weakening of cooperative institutions and changing patterns of agricultural production (Ponte, 2002).

Place

The VUASU headquarters once stood as a central node in the economic and social life of the Northern Pare highlands. Its physical infrastructure, comprising administrative offices, storage facilities, and an active distribution yard, symbolized the strength and reach of cooperative systems in rural Tanzania. It was within this space that farmers accessed essential agricultural inputs such as subsidized fertilizers, iron sheets for housing, and mechanized tools, as well as financial services in the form of loans and credit schemes.

The surrounding landscape further reinforced the significance of this place. Hillsides once characterized by expanding agricultural activity and improved housing conditions reflected the tangible impact of cooperative interventions. The Union functioned not only as an economic institution but also as a social and developmental hub, fostering a sense of collective identity and shared progress among farmers. Over time, however, structural changes in the economy, including liberalization policies, declining cooperative efficiency, and reduced state support, have altered the role of such institutions (Coulson, 2013). Today, the VUASU premises remain physically present but largely inactive, with visible signs of deterioration such as peeling paint, rusted gates, and underutilized facilities. The place has transitioned from a centre of productivity to a site of historical memory, embodying both the achievements and challenges of Tanzania's cooperative movement. The VUASU Co-operative Union (VCU) headquarters in Same District, Kilimanjaro Region is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. VUASU Co-operative Union (VCU) headquarters in Same District, Kilimanjaro Region. The administrative building and signage are interpreted as reflecting its historical role in supporting cooperative agricultural systems. *Photo by author*.

Storytelling

The narrative of the VUASU Co-operative Union is deeply embedded in the lived experiences of the communities it once served. During its peak, the Union functioned as the heartbeat of the Northern Pare agricultural economy. Farmers travelled long distances, often carrying their produce manually, to access the services provided by the Union. The yard would be filled with lorries awaiting distribution tasks, and the sound of materials being loaded and unloaded created a sense of coordinated activity and purpose.

Unlike contemporary bureaucratic systems, the operations of VUASU were characterized by personal relationships and localized knowledge. Clerks and administrators often knew farmers by name, and the process of securing loans or agricultural inputs was embedded within a framework of trust and community engagement. The sensory environment of the Union, from the smell of fertilizers to the sound of typewriters, contributed to a shared experience that reinforced its centrality in everyday life.

In the present, however, this once vibrant narrative has shifted. The absence of activity and sound has transformed the Union into a symbolic space of reflection. This is reflected in structured interview data collected at VUASU on 23 July 2024, where a participant described the current silence as both a sign of change and a reminder of past collective achievements. This silence can be understood as reflecting broader transformations in rural economies, institutional structures, and community dynamics.

Rather than representing a complete loss, the story of VUASU suggests a process of transition. The cooperative model, while

weakened, has left a lasting legacy in shaping agricultural practices, social organization, and local development. The fading soundscape of the Union thus serves as an important aural archive, preserving memories of cooperation, resilience, and socio-economic change within Kilimanjaro's coffee economy.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that Kilimanjaro's coffee economy is not only an economic system but also a form of aural heritage that reflects the region's historical and global connections. Through the Sound–Place–Storytelling approach, the paper shows how soundscapes from factories, cooperatives, and plantations capture shifts in labour organisation, technological development, and economic structures over time. The cases of TCCCo and VUASU illustrate that, although industrial activity and cooperative strength have declined, these changes represent processes of transformation rather than complete loss. The fading and reconfiguring soundscapes of these sites serve as meaningful records of past vitality and present realities, offering an alternative archive through which socio-economic change can be understood. Beyond its empirical contributions, this study highlights the methodological potential of integrating sensory ethnography into historical and development research. By treating sound as both evidence and interpretation, it expands conventional approaches to historiography and provides a more nuanced understanding of everyday lived experiences. The findings also emphasise the importance of recognising and preserving aural dimensions of heritage, which remain largely overlooked in policy and heritage conservation frameworks.

In this regard, aligning with perspectives advanced by UNESCO (2003), the study suggests that soundscapes should be considered an integral part of intangible cultural heritage. Finally, the paper opens new avenues for interdisciplinary research by bridging history, anthropology, and cultural studies, particularly in the context of global commodity systems. It also points to the need for future research to further explore sensory methods across different regions and industries, as well as to engage more systematically with local communities in documenting and preserving aural heritage. Overall, the coffee economy of Kilimanjaro emerges as a dynamic and evolving system in which memory, culture, and global interactions continue to intersect, shaping both local identities and broader transnational connections.

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