

# The edible museum: documenting foodways in a South African township

My doctoral research is focused on exploring and documenting the cultural foodways of a small township community in South Africa called Kayamandi.

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## Where is Kayamandi?



## Why Kayamandi?

This doctoral study forms part of a larger research project which aims to create a more inclusive archival and museological platform of culture in its various guises of the marginalised communities near Stellenbosch (of which Kayamandi is one). These communities' stories have thus far been excluded from the central cultural narrative of the town, and this platform will attempt to communicate and create a dialogue around these narratives.

The goal is to establish an open-source, mobile-friendly digital platform that academics, students and the general public could use as a visual source of cultural information about these communities.

## Why does it matter?

This research is relevant in its exploration of alternative museological formats that could capture the sensory nature of cultural foodways in both a physical and digital form. While photographing and filming the visual aspects of food will add to the digital archive, how does this speak to a physical manifestation of the archive (ie. a museum space) where food may be tasted, sniffed or touched? Given the particular context of a marginalised community with limited yet growing access to information technology, how do the digital and physical documentations together create an informed museological picture?

Given the socio-cultural (read: racial) divide between central Stellenbosch and Kayamandi, this study will also attempt to explore digital (visual) and physical (sensorial) representations of a marginalised food culture with the aim of addressing transformation and social cohesion.

## What's been done?

Given the study's foundation on processes of community engagement and social inclusion, an interpretative approach is used, with the objective of collecting qualitative data. Alongwith the notion of interpretive research, the concept of sensory ethnography is called upon in the research methodology. According to Sarah Pink, sensory ethnography acknowledges "that sensoriality is fundamental to how we learn about, understand and represent other people's lives" (2009: 8). A participatory action research (PAR) design is considered best suited for this study, set within a post-positivist paradigm. Action research is "conceived as a dialectical relationship between 'action' – activities, concrete experiences, practical trials, explorations or applications – and 'learning' or 'research' – understanding, creating and advancing knowledge through reflection, inquiry and critical evaluation" (Zuber-Skerritt 2003: 353-354).

According to this research design, a preliminary data collection phase has already been implemented, to document the broader view of cultural expressions found in the Kayamandi community. Through a mutually beneficial partnership with a local arts organisation, Kayamandi Creative District (KCD), the research team has gained access to the community. These introductions led to others, and through the course of two months we managed to conduct roughly 35 semi-structured interviews. All interviews were voice-recorded, as well as photographs and video taken with smartphone technology. This was done with the view that the future platform would be best-suited for mobile, and data entries would need to fit the relevant system design.

## Where to from here?

From the initial data collection exercise, it has become apparent that there is a need within the community for social gathering spaces. Apart from a handful take-away food stands and shebeens (informal drinking establishments), no such public places exist. Given this need, I have identified from the interviewee group as well as through additional networking a group of candidates who I envision could work as a collective towards the establishment of a social, food space in Kayamandi. Using the PAR methodology, I intend to work with this collective to establish a new model of indoor food market in Kayamandi. It is imperative that this process involves the conceptualization of a business model, as the space would need to be self-sustainable apart from this research project. Secondly, the objective of this space would be to act as a "food museum", whereby the food culture of Kayamandi is represented and opened to interaction and dialogue from the public. By allowing for interaction and dialogue, we will begin to address issues of social transformation and social cohesion in a context where culture (across disciplines) is divided along racial lines. This space would subsequently link with the digital platform, by the collective taking ownership of the food theme within the archive, ensuring its continuous growth and development.

## What does the literature say?

The key theoretical concepts relevant to this study are a cross-section of food cultural studies and museological/archival theory.

The concept of cultural foodways is of central importance in that it contextualizes food as part of a greater system of cultural communication, as described in the seminal work of Roland Barthes on the semiotics of foodways (1961, 2013). Within foodways theory, the notion of commensality has emerged as a particular concept for further exploration. Commensality highlights the social aspect of sharing food, declaring its "almost magical properties in its ability to turn self-seeking individuals into a collaborative group" (Belasco 2008:19). Connected with commensality is the theory of affect, which highlights the impact of spaces of "inbetween-ness" and capacities of bodies to affect and be affected (Gregg and Seigworth 2010:1) – a notion which touches sensoriality and the human impact of food culture. Theories of affect could inform the conceptualization of a new form of archival or museological representation, which embraces both the visual (textual) and the sensory (bodily/physical) data collected.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to my supervisor Elmarie Costandius and fellow PhD colleague Gera de Villiers for their continuing support and contribution to my doctoral research. Funding has in part been provided by the National Research Foundation of South Africa. My heart-felt gratitude is also extended to the many individuals in Kayamandi who have made the research journey thus far an interesting learning experience.

## Citations

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