



Kings of the Sea: What Oral Traditions From Ibrahim Hyderi Reveal about Karachi’s Coastal Past

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Why this matters:

Karachi’s perceived importance in the broader South Asian context increased dramatically following the British annexation of Sindh in the mid-nineteenth century. Popular histories therefore often conceive of the arrival of the British as the beginning of the city’s formal history, mentioning only in passing the coastal communities that inhabited the region before it. Colonial and later histories have also sought to reconstruct Karachi’s deeper past by tracing a line from **Krokola and Alexander’s campaigns**, to **Kolachi**, and finally to colonial **Kurrachee**. In doing so, they connect strands of Western knowledge separated by nearly two thousand years, while often neglecting the traditions of local inhabitants. The result is a largely linear history of a single settlement developing into modern Karachi, rather than the histories of the multiple communities, settlements and coastal geographies eventually incorporated into the city.

How this project responds:

This project approaches Karachi’s past through the oral traditions of the **Mir-Behar fishing community of Ibrahim Hyderi**. Rather than using these accounts simply to test them against archival records, I approach them emically: as a means of understanding how the community itself remembers its origins, identity and relationship with the coast. Semi-structured oral-history interviews recovered accounts of maritime movement, migrations and conflicts that do not feature in written records. **Participatory mapping** was then used to locate the islands, settlements, shrines and other places described in these narratives. Community members identified these sites on maps of the Indus Delta creek system, which were subsequently digitised, allowing their oral history to be reconstructed spatially.

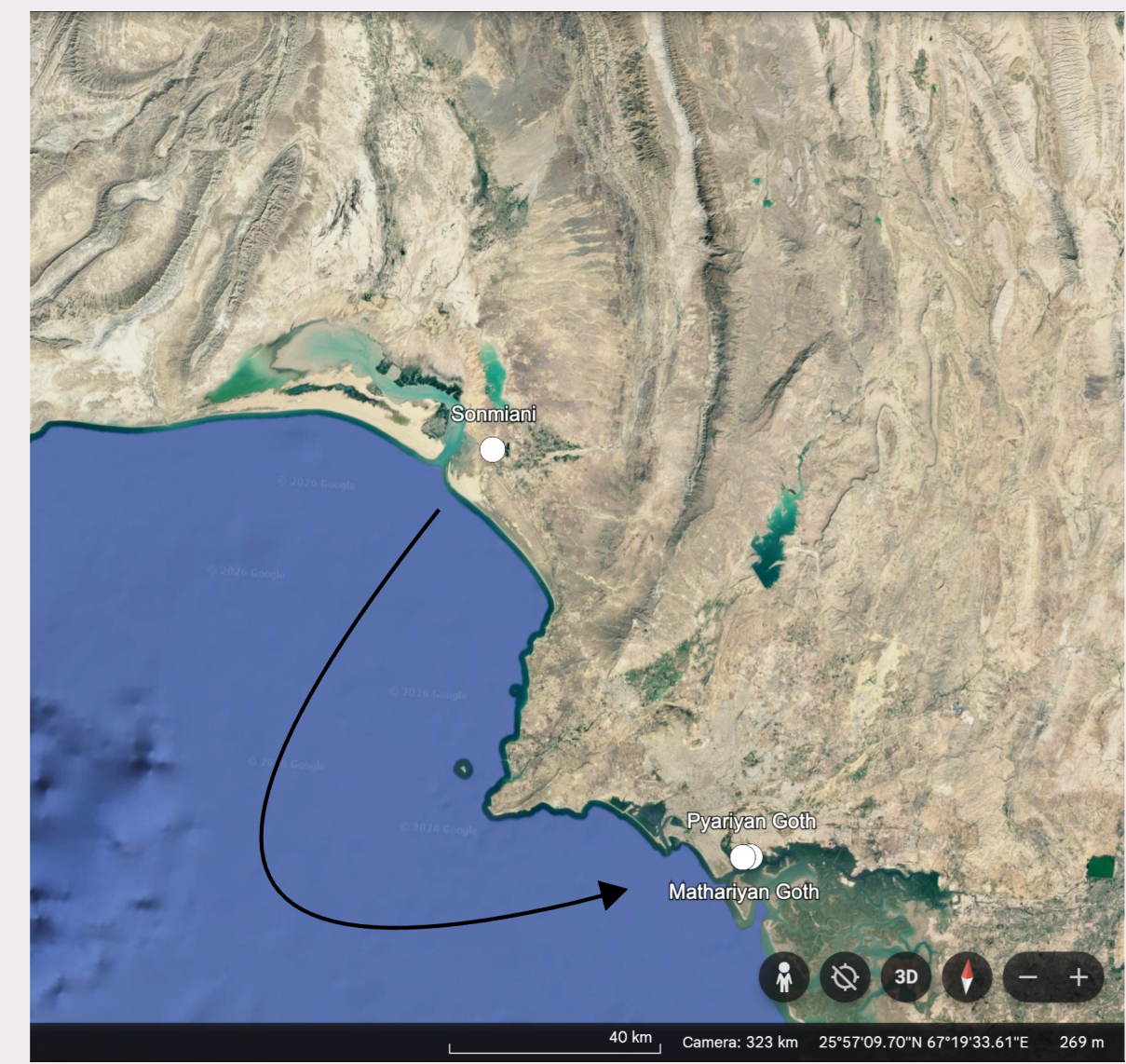
How identity shapes the past:

The oral traditions suggest that the community understands its past through **two overlapping strands of identity: fishing and Islam**. Rather than beginning with the political chronologies prominent in written histories, interviewees repeatedly located their origins within a **maritime world** and within **sacred Islamic history**.

- Fishing as identity:** *Mir-Behar* was the most common form of self-identification. Hussainy explained: *“Behar is Arabic for sea, and Mir is Sindhi for king. So Mir-Behar means King of the Sea.”* Yet this identity was not simply occupational. Interviewees associated it with ancestry, inherited maritime knowledge and participation in a coastal world; one participant identified as Mir-Behar despite not fishing himself.
- Islam as historical frame:** Hussainy traced the community’s foundations to **Nuh**, whose ark made seafaring part of sacred history, and to **Sulaiman**, whom he described as the community’s “son-in-law” through a tradition of his marriage to a fisherwoman. Other traditions connected the community to the **Prophet Muhammad** and to **Mororo Malah**, placing their past within a layered Islamic and Sindhi sacred genealogy.
- A negotiated identity:** Mir-Behar identity was not governed by a single fixed criterion. Fishing, descent, transmitted knowledge, religion and relationship to the sea overlapped unevenly, and different interlocutors emphasised different elements. Membership therefore appears to be **socially understood and negotiated**, rather than defined by occupation alone.

Core finding: communal identity does not simply emerge from history; rather it shapes **which histories are remembered, valued and transmitted**. In Ibrahim Hyderi, the past is preserved above all through the intertwined languages of **faith and maritime belonging**.

Oral History: Two Migrations



1. Flight to Sonmiani
Oral tradition recalls that the community once lived across four fishing settlements in the Phitti and Khaddi creeks. After a confrontation with the Mir’s officials over taxation, the settlements were abandoned and their inhabitants fled by boat to Balochistan, where a local sardar granted them refuge.



2. Return to Korangi Creek
The tradition then describes their return after the Mir invited the community back. Following deliberation through a **jirga**, they chose not to resettle the islands separately, but to establish a single settlement at the mouth of Korangi Creek so that, in their words, “**our strength remains united.**”

A Coastal Network



Interviewees remembered their ancestors as living across **four fishing settlements in the Phitti and Khaddi creeks**: Bundaal, Shan, Quba and Khand. These were not isolated villages, but part of a highly mobile maritime network linked by fishing, trade and shared community identity. They recalled that fishermen spent up to a month at sea, preserving their catch with salt before selling it to merchants who traded it onwards to Burma and parts of India.

Historical Geography:

Interviewees described Ibrahim Hyderi’s historical geography as shaped by the meeting of **two interconnected natural systems: the Indus Delta and the Arabian Sea coast**. Hussainy remembered a freshwater channel flowing through Korangi and forming the surrounding creeks, before the community established **Mathariyan Goth** and **Pyariyan Goth** near the area of the present-day PAF Base.

For Hussainy, this geography explained the **natural habitability of the coast**: fresh water was available for drinking, while the sea provided fishing and maritime livelihood. Mushtaq also recalled easier access to **Khadda Market**, a local port, while both interviewees stressed the importance of mangroves for protection, fuel, fodder and as nurseries for fish and shrimp.

“We could easily get fresh water here, and we could also easily earn our livelihood [by fishing in the sea].”

Core finding: in these accounts, nature is not simply an abstract setting but an **active participant in the community’s wider social structure**, enabling settlement, fishing, trade and everyday life.

Key implications:

- Karachi’s past was not simply the history of a single settlement developing into a modern city.** Oral memory preserves the history of **multiple interconnected and highly mobile coastal settlements** that were eventually incorporated into Karachi.
- Identity shapes historical memory.** The community’s sense of itself as **Mir-Behar, Muslim and maritime** influences which elements of the past are remembered, valued and transmitted.
- These traditions recover **alternative historical reference points** to those foregrounded in colonial accounts—from Nuh, Sulaiman and Mororo Malah to migrations, creeks and fishing settlements—complicating histories centred on Krokola, conquest and colonial development.
- The community’s history also shows that **coastal geography was integral to social and economic life**. Remembered changes in freshwater flows and mangrove forests therefore represent not simply environmental change, but transformations of a wider maritime way of life.
- Looking outward:** interviewees present the creeks and fishing economy as having value far beyond Ibrahim Hyderi—supporting exports, employment and interconnected markets. This points towards a policy approach that treats the **Indus Delta creek system, mangrove ecology and fishing economy as one connected national asset**, rather than as separate environmental and livelihood issues.