

AN ASSESSMENT OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE RESPONSIBILITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the role of civic engagement and cultural stewardship in preserving Nigeria's tangible and intangible heritage. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach combining survey data from 400 participants across three geopolitical zones and historical archival analysis, the research evaluates public perception regarding heritage responsibility. The main objective was to determine how localized, community-driven initiatives impact the preservation of historical artifacts and traditions compared to top-down government mandates. The findings reveal that while 85% of respondents recognize the value of national heritage, institutional neglect and economic displacement pose severe threats to preservation efforts. Furthermore, the data indicates a statistically significant correlation between community-led educational programs and increased civic responsibility. The study concludes that heritage preservation cannot be outsourced solely to state institutions; it demands an inclusive, participatory framework where every citizen actively engages. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the federal ministry of information and culture should partner with local governance structures to institutionalize community-based heritage boards and integrate heritage studies deeply into the basic education curriculum.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Civic Engagement, Responsibilities.

Introduction

Nigeria possesses a remarkably rich, intricate, and deeply diverse cultural tapestry. Geopolitically situated as one of the most populous and ethnically diverse nations on the African continent, it encompasses over 250 distinct ethnic nationalities including the major demographic groups of the Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, alongside hundreds of minority ethnic groups such as the Ijaw, Kanuri, Fulani, Tiv, Ibibio, and Edo (Falola & Heaton, 2008). This pluricultural society is further characterized by thousands of indigenous linguistic dialects that serve as living repositories of historical knowledge, oral literature, and philosophical worldviews. Beyond intangible expressions, Nigeria's historical trajectory is concretized in its vast wealth of material culture and architectural monuments. These range from the ancient engineering marvels of the Benin Moat and the defensive fortifications of the Ancient Kano Walls to the spiritual ecology embedded within the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Osun-

Osogbo Sacred Grove (Prott & O'Keefe, 1989; UNESCO, 2005). Collectively, this multi-layered heritage constitutes the foundational bedrock of Nigeria's national identity, serving as an anchor for historical continuity, cross-generational pride, and collective memory.

Despite its intrinsic value, the preservation of these critical historical, architectural, and cultural assets has historically faced severe, systemic challenges rooted in both colonial policy and post-independence governance frameworks. For decades, the dominant institutional paradigm framed heritage conservation as an exclusive, centralized function of the state. This approach became deeply institutionalized through post-colonial legislative instruments, such as Decree No. 77 of 1979, which established the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and vested it with the sole statutory authority to discover, declare, preserve, and manage national monuments and antiquities (Okpoko, 2006). This legal structures placed heavy reliance on underfunded government agencies, shifting the role of conservation entirely onto state bureaucracy. Consequently, heritage management became a highly technical, top-down administrative exercise conducted by distant state actors, completely detached from the organic lived experiences of the populations interacting with these spaces daily.

This highly bureaucratic, top-down institutional approach has frequently alienated local host communities, resulting in a pervasive and destructive sense of psychological and socio-spatial detachment. When the state cordons off historical artifacts, archaeological sites, and ancestral landscapes, labeling them strictly as "government property" or state preserves, it actively strips local populations of their ancestral roles as natural custodians. This administrative alienation creates a dangerous civic vacuum. Rather than viewing local landmarks as collective communal wealth or an inherited legacy to be fiercely protected, citizens begin to perceive them as external, state-owned liabilities that yield little to no direct benefit to their immediate socioeconomic realities (Agbontaen, 2019).

This structural detachment is further compounded and accelerated by contemporary macroeconomic and sociological pressures. Rapid, unregulated urbanization frequently leads to the physical encroachment and demolition of ancient earthworks and historic buildings to make way for modern commercial real estate (Ogunremi & Bello, 2022). Simultaneously, Western-centric globalization trends redefine social values among the youth, frequently displacing indigenous languages and traditions in favor of foreign cultural frameworks. This cultural erosion is exacerbated by persistent economic hardships, which force impoverished communities to prioritize immediate survival over historical conservation, occasionally driving individuals into the lucrative, illicit global market for smuggled African antiquities (Brodie & Tubb, 2012). Furthermore, sporadic waves of religious fundamentalism across various regions have led to the targeted ideological defacement and structural destruction of indigenous shrines, carvings, and historical sites, reallocating heritage preservation to the absolute margins of public priority and political will.

The study underscores a fundamental philosophical and structural shift in response to this ongoing cultural crisis. It argues that sustainable heritage preservation must radically transcend

centralized bureaucratic custody and transform into an active, deeply participatory civic duty. In a nation grappling with complex identity politics and institutional fragility, cultural conservation can no longer be treated as a secondary project reserved for academics and state officials. Instead, every individual citizen, traditional community leader, private enterprise, and academic institution must recognize their direct, intersecting stakes within this fragile cultural ecosystem.

Private enterprises must realize that investing in local history yields vibrant cultural capital and tourism revenue; academic institutions must reposition themselves as centers for public-facing historiography; and grassroots communities must be legally re-incentivized to act as frontline defenders of their local monuments (Usman, 2020). By systematically investigating the socio-political and economic dynamics of public participation in cultural preservation, this paper explores the strategic mechanisms required to transition the public from a state of passive spectatorship to active, empowered stewardship. Ultimately, this research seeks to chart a sustainable path forward, demonstrating how shared civic responsibility can robustly safeguard Nigeria's historic legacy, ensuring its survival as an active resource for future generations.

Statement of the Problem

The preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage is currently in a state of critical crisis, characterized by systemic institutional decay, pervasive illicit trafficking of antiquities, and profound civic apathy. Despite the existence of legal frameworks and regulatory bodies tasked with protecting national monuments, many historic sites across the country suffer from severe neglect, structural degradation, and encroachment. Public museums frequently lack the modern technological infrastructure, climate control systems, and security apparatus necessary to adequately conserve fragile artifacts.

Concurrently, a significant gap exists between the state's conservation policies and the lived realities of local communities. Because local populations are rarely integrated into the economic and structural management of heritage sites within their domains, they often lack the incentive to protect them from vandalism, looting, or environmental destruction. Furthermore, the erosion of cultural heritage education in the national school curriculum has produced generations of youth who feel disconnected from their historical roots. Without an urgent, empirical reassessment of how civic responsibility can be mobilized alongside institutional reform, Nigeria risks permanently losing invaluable historical markers that define its contributions to global civilization.

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between citizen engagement and the sustainable preservation of Nigeria's cultural heritage. The specific objectives are to:

1. Evaluate the current level of public awareness and sense of personal responsibility regarding the preservation of local historical sites and cultural artifacts in Nigeria.
 2. Examine the effectiveness of community-led heritage preservation initiatives compared to state-managed conservation programs.
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3. Identify the socioeconomic and institutional barriers preventing active citizen participation in cultural heritage stewardship.
4. Formulate an inclusive framework that integrates public, private, and community stakeholders into a unified heritage preservation strategy.

Research Questions

1. To what extent are Nigerian citizens aware of their civic responsibilities regarding the preservation of national cultural heritage?
2. Is there a significant difference in the preservation outcomes of historical sites managed by local communities compared to those managed strictly by state agencies?
3. What primary factors hinder local communities from actively participating in the protection and maintenance of historical monuments within their regions?

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between active community-based educational engagement and the structural preservation status of local cultural heritage sites.
2. There is a statistically significant relationship between active community-based educational engagement and the structural preservation status of local cultural heritage sites.

Methodology

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative key informant interviews to secure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The study population spanned three historically rich geopolitical zones in Nigeria: the South-West (focusing on Oyo and Osun states), the North-West (focusing on Kano and Kaduna states), and the South-South (focusing on Edo State).

A sample size of 400 respondents was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. In the first stage, purposive sampling was deployed to select cities with globally recognized heritage sites (e.g., Osogbo, Benin City, and Kano). In the second stage, simple random sampling was used to distribute a structured questionnaire titled Cultural Heritage Preservation and Civic Responsibility Questionnaire (CHPCRQ) to residents living within a 10-kilometer radius of these historical landmarks.

Sampling Distribution Matrix

Geopolitical Zone	Target Heritage Site	Sample Allocation
South-West	Osun-Osogbo Grove	150
North-West	Ancient Kano Walls	130
South-South	Ancient Benin Moat	120
Total		400

Qualitative data was gathered through 12 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted with museum curators, traditional rulers, community leaders, and officials from the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM). Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentages, mean scores) and inferential statistics (Chi-square test of

independence) via statistical software, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to provide contextual depth to the quantitative metrics.

Results

The quantitative data retrieved from the 400 administered questionnaires yielded critical insights into public disposition toward cultural stewardship. When assessed on public awareness, 72% of respondents acknowledged that historical monuments were vital to national identity; however, only 24% believed that individual citizens shared equal responsibility with the government for their daily maintenance and protection.

To test the hypothesis regarding the impact of community engagement on preservation outcomes, a Chi-Square test of independence was performed. The analysis cross-tabulated the level of community-based heritage education programs against the documented structural condition of neighboring historical monuments (categorized as *Well Preserved*, *Partially Degraded*, or *Severely Dilapidated*).

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$$

The empirical calculations rendered a χ^2 value of 24.58, with a p -value of 0.001 ($p < 0.05$). Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected, demonstrating a statistically significant relationship between local civic engagement initiatives and the physical preservation quality of heritage assets. Historical sites where host communities were actively educated and involved showed a 45% lower rate of vandalism and structural encroachment compared to sites under isolated state custody.

Discussion of Findings

The empirical results of this study reveal an unsustainable disconnect within Nigeria's cultural ecosystem. While the high level of conceptual awareness (72%) indicates that Nigerians value their heritage in the abstract, the lack of operational responsibility (24%) highlights a major flaw in national civic orientation. For too long, post-colonial heritage management in Nigeria has suffered from bureaucratic isolation. When state actors treat cultural sites as cordoned-off government zones, local communities develop a sense of alienation, viewing these spaces with indifference or economic resentment.

The rejection of the null hypothesis strongly validates the title's premise: No one gets to stand outside. The significant correlation between community education and improved preservation scores proves that the most efficient custodians of history are the people living alongside it. In areas where traditional leadership and youth associations were given shared governance over local monuments, illegal excavations, dumping, and land encroachment dropped substantially. This aligns with contemporary global conservation models which assert that sustainable preservation is fundamentally decentralized, democratic, and community-driven.

Conclusion

The preservation of Nigeria's vast historical tapestry and cultural heritage can no longer be relegated to an optional luxury, a sentimental afterthought, or an exclusive, top-down bureaucratic mandate assigned to underfunded and overextended state institutions. This

empirical investigation has systematically demonstrated that the physical degradation, structural decay, and aggressive looting of Nigeria's historic monuments are not merely environmental or economic inevitabilities; rather, they are directly symptomatic of a systemic exclusion and alienation of host communities from the management and ownership of their localized historical assets. When the state establishes artificial walls around heritage sites treating them as remote government property rather than organic, communal anchors it inadvertently fosters an atmosphere of civic detachment, vulnerability, and public apathy.

If the current trajectory of institutional neglect, structural underfunding, and grassroots alienation is allowed to persist unchecked, the consequences will extend far beyond the loss of physical artifacts. Future generations of Nigerians risk being entirely severed from their historical reference points, ancestral achievements, and cultural anchors. In a rapidly globalizing world, this disconnect directly compromises the integrity of national identity and weakens the socio-cultural fabric that binds a highly pluralistic society together. Without a tangible, accessible history to inspire collective pride, the foundation for civic cohesion and national consciousness begins to erode.

Ultimately, heritage preservation must be reimagined as a collective, active, and non-negotiable civic obligation. True, sustainable conservation does not occur through the mere passing of legislative acts or the isolated efforts of museum curators; it materializes when local communities, civil society organizations, private enterprises, and state actors converge within a synchronized, participatory framework. This cooperative ecosystem must be governed by a singular, unified philosophy: national history belongs to everyone. Because our heritage is a shared inheritance, its protection requires active stewardship from every citizen, establishing a definitive cultural paradigm where no one gets to stand outside and there are absolutely no passive bystanders.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings, statistical analyses, and qualitative insights distilled throughout this study, the following policy and actionable recommendations are put forward to transform Nigeria's heritage management framework from an isolated bureaucratic system into an inclusive, participatory ecosystem:

1. Decentralize Heritage Management and Institutionalize Co-Governance

The National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) must urgently transition away from its historically centralized, top-down bureaucratic management paradigm. In its place, the commission should adopt a Collaborative Management (Co-Management) Model that actively deconstructs the barrier between the state and local populations.

Actionable Step: Establish formalized Local Heritage Advisory Boards (LHABs) for every major national monument and historic site across Nigeria's geopolitical zones.

Composition: These boards must not be populated by distant political appointees. Instead, they should structurally comprise traditional rulers (who serve as the custodian of ancestral lands), local youth leaders, community advocates, and resident scholars.

Impact: By legally empowering these boards to oversee daily monitoring, security curation, and basic maintenance, the state directly addresses the alienation highlighted in the study. When local residents hold institutional seats and voting power regarding the physical assets in their domain, the psychological transition from "government property" to "our shared wealth" is achieved.

2. Revitalize Educational Curricula and Cultivate Experiential Civic Responsibility

The empirical data explicitly proved that proactive education correlates with a drastic reduction in monument degradation and vandalism. Therefore, the Federal Ministry of Education, in close coordination with the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), must systematically overhaul how national history is taught.

Actionable Step: Fully reintegrate and expand standardized History and Cultural Heritage Studies into the core curriculum of all primary and secondary schools nationwide. This must move beyond rote memorization of dates to critical discussions on civic stewardship and cultural identity.

Experiential Learning: The curriculum should mandate termly, fully credited Field Studies and Experiential Visits to local historical landmarks, archeological sites, and museums.

Impact: Introducing children to their historical anchors at an impressionable age normalizes the concept of cultural stewardship. It builds an early, cross-generational ethos of active civic responsibility, ensuring that the next generation does not view these spaces with the destructive apathy observed in contemporary urban spaces.

3. Establish Strategic Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) via Fiscal Incentives

Given the severe fiscal constraints and competing budget priorities facing federal and state governments, relying solely on public coffers to fund heritage preservation is unsustainable. The state must position cultural heritage as a viable sector for corporate social responsibility (CSR) and private investment.

Actionable Step: The Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS), in alignment with the Ministry of Information and Culture, should design and implement a targeted framework of Heritage Conservation Tax Incentives. Corporate organizations, tech firms, and private philanthropic foundations should receive verifiable tax credits or deductions equivalent to their documented financial investments in heritage preservation.

Target Areas: Private funding should be explicitly channeled into the urgent structural restoration of crumbling architecture, the creation of modern museum facilities, and high-tech Digitization Initiatives (such as 3D-mapping ancient sites, creating virtual reality museum tours, and archiving endangered indigenous oral histories).

Impact: This diversifies the funding pool, infuses corporate efficiency into site management, and modernizes Nigeria's historical cataloging to meet global museum standards.

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