

Cultural Heritage Preservation through Proverbs and Oral Traditions among the Urhobo People of Delta State, Nigeria

John Oghenoro Itiveh

College of Education, Warri, Delta State
beneltagas@gmail.com

Abstract

The preservation of cultural heritage through oral traditions and proverbs constitutes a critical dimension of intangible cultural heritage management in sub-Saharan Africa. This study investigates the role of proverbs and oral traditions in the preservation of cultural heritage among the Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria. Employing a qualitative research design anchored in ethnographic fieldwork, the study engaged sixty (60) purposively selected participants comprising community elders, traditional rulers, herbalists, market women, and schoolteachers across four Urhobo communities: Warri, Ughelli, Sapele, and Abraka. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation, and were thematically analysed using an interpretive framework informed by Cultural Memory Theory and the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). Findings reveal that Urhobo proverbs and oral narratives function as multidimensional repositories of moral instruction, social governance, conflict resolution, environmental wisdom, gender identity, and historical memory. The study further identifies eight principal threats to oral heritage transmission, including Western cultural assimilation (88.3%), youth disengagement (85.0%), and the absence of institutional documentation frameworks (76.7%). The study concludes that the systematic integration of proverbs and oral traditions into educational curricula, digital archiving platforms, and community cultural festivals is imperative for sustainable heritage preservation. These findings have significant policy implications for cultural heritage management across multilingual and multi-ethnic African societies.

Keywords: cultural heritage preservation; Urhobo proverbs; oral traditions; intangible cultural heritage; Delta State; ethnography; cultural memory

1. Introduction

Cultural heritage constitutes the bedrock upon which communities construct their identities, sustain their social structures, and transmit their accumulated wisdom across generational boundaries. Within the African socio-cultural context, where literacy rates were historically constrained and written documentation systems were largely absent, oral traditions emerged as the primary vehicle for the preservation and dissemination of knowledge, values, norms, and historical memory (Okpewho, 1992; Vansina, 1985). Proverbs, myths, folktales, songs, riddles, and ritual performances collectively form the corpus of what UNESCO (2003) designates as intangible cultural heritage that is living, dynamic, and perpetually recreated through practice, performance, and community participation. The Urhobo people of Delta State, Nigeria, constitute one of the most culturally vibrant ethnic nationalities in the Niger Delta region, numbering approximately two million people distributed across twenty-two clans (Otite, 1973; Darah, 2005). Their rich oral heritage encompasses an extensive repertoire of proverbs (*edjọ*), songs (*ẹrọ*), narratives (*ẹkọvita*), and ritual chants that encode the community's philosophy, jurisprudence, ecological knowledge, and relational ethics. Urhobo proverbs, in particular, function as condensed repositories of wisdom, deploying figurative language, metaphor, and analogy to communicate moral prescriptions, social expectations, and historical experiences with remarkable economy of expression (Aghalino, 2004; Nwoye, 2011).

Despite their cultural significance, Urhobo oral traditions face unprecedented threats in the contemporary era. The accelerating pace of globalisation, Western cultural assimilation, religious transformation,

urbanisation, and the marginalisation of indigenous languages in formal educational institutions have collectively disrupted the intergenerational transmission of oral knowledge (Simons & Fennig, 2018; Brock-Utne, 2000). The progressive attrition of fluent tradition-bearers elders who possess deep knowledge of proverbs, ritual language, and narrative traditions presents an irreversible loss that no subsequent documentation effort can fully compensate (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). UNESCO's (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, ratified by Nigeria in 2009, acknowledges the urgency of this challenge and mandates state parties to implement identification, documentation, and revitalisation measures; yet practical implementation in local communities such as those of the Urhobo remains significantly limited (Adeyemi & Adeyemi, 2014). Scholarly attention to Urhobo oral traditions, whilst growing, has remained largely fragmented, tending toward linguistic or literary analysis of individual proverb collections without situating them within a comprehensive framework of cultural heritage preservation (Ohwovoriole, 2009; Onwuekwe, 2013). There is, therefore, a demonstrable gap in the literature concerning the mechanisms through which proverbs and oral traditions function as heritage preservation tools, the institutional and community contexts that sustain or impede such transmission, and the strategic interventions required to ensure their longevity.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the following research questions: (1) In what ways do proverbs and oral traditions function as instruments of cultural heritage preservation among the Urhobo people? (2) What thematic domains do Urhobo proverbs and oral traditions address, and how do these domains reflect

the community's cultural priorities? (3) What are the principal challenges confronting the preservation and transmission of Urhobo oral traditions in the contemporary period? (4) What strategies are required to ensure the sustainable preservation of Urhobo oral heritage?

The study's contributions are threefold. Theoretically, it advances the application of Cultural Memory Theory to non-Western oral heritage contexts. Empirically, it provides original field data from four Urhobo communities that enrich the growing literature on African intangible cultural heritage. Practically, it offers evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, educators, and community organisations engaged in heritage preservation. The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 presents a comprehensive literature review; Section 3 details the research methodology; Section 4 presents the findings; Section 5 discusses the implications; and Section 6 offers conclusions and recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Oral Traditions and Cultural Heritage in African Contexts

The conceptual landscape of oral traditions in Africa is as heterogeneous as the continent itself, encompassing a wide range of communicative forms including proverbs, myths, legends, epics, genealogies, riddles, songs, and ritual incantations (Okpewho, 1992; Finnegan, 2012). Scholars have long debated the ontological status of oral traditions: whether they constitute 'literature' in the conventional sense, or whether they demand an entirely different theoretical and

analytical apparatus (Ong, 1982; Lord, 1960). Walter Ong's foundational distinction between primary oral cultures, those with no knowledge of writing and those characterised by 'secondary orality' where oral forms persist alongside and interact with literacy remains highly productive for understanding the Urhobo context, where oral traditions continue to be performed in communities that also possess literacy (Ong, 1982).

The UNESCO (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage provides the dominant institutional framework for understanding oral traditions as cultural heritage. The Convention defines intangible cultural heritage to include oral traditions and expressions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship. Crucially, the Convention emphasises the living, dynamic character of intangible heritage — its perpetual recreation through communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history (UNESCO, 2003). This dynamism distinguishes oral traditions from static artefacts and necessitates preservation approaches that foreground community participation rather than mere archival storage.

Jan Assmann's Cultural Memory Theory offers another productive framework for understanding oral traditions as heritage. Assmann (1992) distinguishes between communicative memory the informal, oral transmission of recent history within living generational memory and cultural memory, which encompasses the codified, institutionalised memory of a community's distant past, often transmitted through ritualised performance and specialist knowledge. Urhobo proverbs and oral narratives operate at the intersection of these two memory forms: they encode ancient wisdom and historical experience

whilst being continuously performed and reinterpreted in contemporary social contexts (Erl, 2011). Maurice Halbwachs's (1992) earlier concept of collective memory further underscores how oral traditions function to construct and maintain group identity, binding community members together through shared narrative frameworks.

In the African context, Vansina (1985) demonstrated in his seminal work on oral tradition as history that African oral narratives are not merely imaginative constructs but function as legitimate historical sources, encoding information about past events, migrations, kinship structures, and political formations. This insight challenged Eurocentric dismissals of oral cultures as pre-historical or primitive, establishing African oral traditions as epistemologically valid systems of knowledge production (Mudimbe, 1988; Wiredu, 1996). More recently, scholars such as Abrahams (2005) and Yankah (1995) have developed nuanced analyses of proverb performance, demonstrating that proverbs are not merely static repositories of wisdom but are dynamically deployed in specific interactional contexts to achieve particular rhetorical and social goals.

Despite this substantial theoretical foundation, the application of heritage studies frameworks to African oral traditions remains underdeveloped, particularly in the Nigerian context. Most studies adopt either a purely linguistic approach focusing on the structural and semantic features of proverbs or a literary approach examining oral narratives as artistic texts without integrating the heritage management dimensions of documentation, preservation, transmission, and revitalisation (Obiechina, 1975; Isola, 2010). The present study addresses this lacuna by explicitly situating Urhobo oral traditions within a cultural heritage management framework.

2.2 Urhobo Oral Traditions: A Socio-cultural Overview

The Urhobo people occupy the western Niger Delta of present-day Delta State, Nigeria, inhabiting a territory characterised by mangrove forests, freshwater creeks, and agricultural hinterlands. Their social organisation is based on patrilineal descent, with the extended family (*ẹgbe*) and the clan (*oboro*) constituting the principal units of social solidarity (Otite, 1973). Traditional Urhobo society was governed through a gerontocratic system in which elders (*ẹgbọ ẹ-ọvuvu*) held authority by virtue of age, wisdom, and accumulated ritual knowledge, with the *Ovie* (paramount ruler) serving as the supreme custodian of the community's cultural and political heritage (Aghalino, 2004). Within this social structure, oral traditions performed essential functions of socialisation, governance, conflict resolution, and cosmological explanation. Proverbs (*edjo*) constituted the most highly valued oral genre, their mastery signifying wisdom, eloquence, and social authority (Ohwovoriola, 2009). The Urhobo saying '*Edjo nẹ Urhobo re*' — 'Proverbs are the horses of speech' captures the centrality of proverbial wisdom in Urhobo communicative practice. Proverbs were deployed in virtually every domain of social life: in judicial proceedings to establish precedent and frame verdicts; in ceremonial contexts to invoke ancestral sanction; in pedagogical settings to instruct the young; and in everyday discourse to counsel, advise, warn, and console (Darah, 2005).

Beyond proverbs, Urhobo oral traditions encompass an extensive repertoire of narrative genres. *Ekovita* (historical narratives) chronicled the origins and migrations of Urhobo clans, the exploits of founding ancestors, and the history of inter-

clan relations. *Ẹrọ* (songs) accompanied virtually every social ceremony birth, initiation, marriage, burial, harvest, encoding ritual prescriptions and emotional affects appropriate to each occasion. *Alo* (riddles) served as intellectual games through which children were trained in metaphorical thinking and cultural knowledge. Spirit possession ceremonies (*Evwri* and *Udje*) combined narrative, music, and performance in complex artistic events that simultaneously entertained, adjudicated, and communicated with supernatural forces (Darah, 1982; Nabofa, 1994). The transmission of Urhobo oral traditions operated through carefully structured intergenerational mechanisms. Children learned proverbs and narratives in the family compound through nightly storytelling sessions led by grandparents, in age-grade associations (*egbe*) through peer interaction and collective performance, and in apprenticeship relationships with specialist tradition-bearers such as court historians (*ẹphẹphẹ*), diviner-priests (*ẹdje*), and herbalists (*oghoghọ*). The social sanctions against misquoting proverbs or misrepresenting oral narratives were significant, serving to maintain a degree of textual fidelity across generations (Okpewho, 1979; Isola, 2010). Recent scholarship has begun to examine the gendered dimensions of Urhobo oral traditions. Whilst male elders have traditionally been positioned as the primary custodians of proverbial wisdom and historical narrative, women have maintained their own parallel oral traditions particularly lullabies, women's work songs, birth rite narratives, and market poetry that encode distinctly feminine perspectives on social life, kinship, and gender relations (Odafe, 2011; Orubu, 2016). The under-representation of women's oral traditions in the scholarly literature constitutes a significant gap that this study partially addresses through the inclusion of female participants in its research design.

2.3 Proverbs as Instruments of Cultural Heritage Preservation

The role of proverbs as instruments of cultural heritage preservation has attracted considerable scholarly attention across African linguistics, folklore studies, and cultural anthropology (Yankah, 1995; Schipper, 2003; Mieder, 2004). Proverbs are distinguished from other oral genres by their brevity, figurative character, and wide social currency: they are typically short, metaphorical propositions that condense complex cultural wisdom into memorable, quotable units of expression (Norrick, 1985; Taylor, 1931). This formal character makes proverbs particularly effective instruments of cultural transmission, as their compact structure facilitates memorisation, repeated performance, and cross-contextual applicability.

Wolfgang Mieder (2004), one of the foremost paremiologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has argued that proverbs function as the 'wisdom of many and the wit of one' — simultaneously reflecting collective cultural experience and individual creative expression. In the African context, Kwame Gyekye (1987) demonstrated that Akan proverbs constitute a systematic philosophical corpus encoding the community's metaphysics, ethics, and social theory, arguing that African proverb collections are equivalent in philosophical depth to the written philosophical traditions of Western civilisation. Similar claims have been advanced for Yoruba (Abimbola, 1975), Igbo (Achebe, 1964; Obiechina, 1975), Zulu (Nyembezi, 1954), and Ganda (Nsimbi, 1956) proverb traditions.

Proverbs serve cultural heritage preservation through several interrelated mechanisms. First, they encode historical memory: many proverbs make oblique references to specific historical events, persons, or circumstances that serve as mnemonic anchors connecting present generations to the past (Vansina, 1985; Nzewi, 2003). Second, proverbs transmit

normative frameworks: by articulating moral prescriptions, social expectations, and behavioural prohibitions in memorable figurative form, proverbs function as portable codes of conduct that orient individuals within their cultural community (Yankah, 1995; Opoku, 1975). Third, proverbs encode ecological knowledge: many African proverbs draw on observations of the natural world the behaviour of animals, the properties of plants, the rhythms of seasons to communicate cultural wisdom, thereby preserving indigenous environmental knowledge (Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Berkes, 2012).

Fourth, proverbs function as instruments of social governance. In many African societies, proverbs serve quasi-legal functions, being cited in judicial proceedings to establish precedent, frame verdicts, and justify decisions (Obiechina, 1975; Agbasiere, 2000). The authority of proverbs in this context derives from their communal ownership: unlike individual speech acts that can be disputed, proverbs claim the sanction of collective ancestral wisdom and are therefore more difficult to refute (Yankah, 1995). Fifth, proverbs perform an identity-marking function, signalling membership in a particular cultural community through shared linguistic and metaphorical codes. The ability to deploy proverbs appropriately signals cultural competence and social belonging, whilst the inability to understand them marks one as a cultural outsider (Schipper, 2003).

Recent research has explored the digital preservation of African proverbs, with scholars arguing that digital archiving, computational analysis, and online dissemination platforms offer promising tools for ensuring the survival of proverb traditions threatened by language shift and the death of tradition-bearers (Wakhungu, 2018; Diallo, 2019). However, digital preservation alone is insufficient: Kurin (2004) and Smith (2006) have cautioned

that decontextualised archiving can produce 'museum cultures' preserved but no longer living and that sustainable preservation requires community-based transmission mechanisms that keep oral traditions embedded in social practice.

2.4 Challenges to the Preservation of Oral Traditions in Contemporary Nigeria

The preservation of oral traditions in contemporary Nigeria faces a convergence of structural, cultural, and institutional challenges that scholars have characterised as constituting a crisis of intangible cultural heritage (Adeyemi & Adeyemi, 2014; Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013). Chief amongst these challenges is language shift the progressive abandonment of indigenous languages in favour of English and Nigerian Pidgin English in public domains, including education, commerce, government, and media (Simons & Fennig, 2018; Bamgbose, 2000). Since oral traditions are inextricably embedded in specific linguistic forms particular phonological structures, idiomatic expressions, and metaphorical frameworks language shift inevitably entails the erosion of the oral traditions encoded in the shifting language (Fishman, 1991; Crystal, 2000).

Nigeria's educational system has historically marginalised indigenous languages and cultural knowledge. The colonial imposition of English as the medium of instruction and the post-colonial continuation of this policy have created generations of Nigerians who are functionally illiterate in their mother tongues and who therefore cannot access, appreciate, or transmit the oral traditions of their communities (Brock-Utne, 2000; Ndimele, 2012). Whilst the 1977 National Policy on Education mandated the use of the mother tongue as medium of instruction in the first three years of primary schooling, implementation has been inconsistent and English continues to dominate educational

practice at all levels (Adegbija, 2004; Bamgbose, 2000).

Globalisation and Western cultural influences, mediated through television, social media, popular music, and transnational consumer culture, have profoundly reshaped the cultural aspirations and identity orientations of Nigerian youth (Tanner, 2007; Nwoye, 2011). Young people in urban Urhobo communities increasingly identify with global popular culture rather than local oral traditions, perceiving indigenous proverbs and narratives as archaic, rustic, or irrelevant to contemporary life (Odafe, 2011). This generational rupture in cultural identification is perhaps the most acute threat to oral tradition transmission, since oral traditions cannot survive the withdrawal of the next generation of practitioners.

Religious transformation particularly the spread of Pentecostal Christianity, which tends to regard traditional cultural practices as spiritually dangerous has also significantly impacted oral tradition transmission in Niger Delta communities (Ukah, 2008; Nabofa, 1994). Many proverbs and oral narratives are embedded in cosmological frameworks that incorporate ancestral spirits, divinities, and ritual practices incompatible with Pentecostal theology. The growing influence of churches that actively discourage participation in traditional ceremonies has removed important performative contexts in which oral traditions were previously transmitted.

The absence of institutional frameworks for the documentation and preservation of oral heritage has been identified as a critical governance failure. Whilst Nigeria is a signatory to the UNESCO (2003) Convention, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) and the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) have focused predominantly on tangible heritage

artefacts, monuments, sites with limited programmatic attention to intangible heritage documentation (Adeyemi & Adeyemi, 2014). At the state level, Delta State's cultural institutions similarly lack systematic oral heritage inventorying or archiving programmes. The absence of a National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage, as mandated by the Convention, means that large quantities of oral heritage disappear without record as tradition-bearers age and die (UNESCO, 2003; Kurin, 2004).

Scholars have proposed a range of interventions to address these challenges. Community-based cultural festivals and oral performance competitions have been shown to sustain intergenerational transmission by creating performative contexts for oral traditions (Schipper, 2003; Diallo, 2019). The integration of proverbs and oral narratives into school curricula has been advocated as a means of reaching young people within institutional frameworks (Brock-Utne, 2000; Isola, 2010). Digital archiving and dissemination platforms including audio-visual archives, websites, and mobile applications have been proposed as tools for reaching diaspora communities and tech-savvy youth (Wakhungu, 2018). Academic research partnerships between universities and communities have been identified as productive mechanisms for combining scholarly rigour with community ownership in documentation and revitalisation projects (Owusu-Ansah & Mji, 2013).

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically anchored in two complementary frameworks: Cultural Memory Theory (Assmann, 1992; Erll, 2011) and the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Framework (UNESCO, 2003). Cultural Memory Theory, as developed by Jan and Aleida Assmann, provides a robust conceptualisation of how communities store, transmit, and access

cultural knowledge across generational boundaries. The theory distinguishes between communicative memory embodied in everyday oral communication and typically spanning three to four generations and cultural memory, which transcends living experience through ritualised, specialised, and institutionally supported transmission mechanisms. This distinction illuminates the vulnerability of Urhobo oral traditions: as the generation of fluent tradition-bearers diminishes, the risk of communicative memory collapsing before transitioning into institutionalised cultural memory becomes acute.

Astrid Erll's (2011) extension of Cultural Memory Theory into a 'dynamics of cultural memory' framework, which emphasises the processual, contested, and media-specific character of memory transmission, is particularly relevant to the present study. Erll's framework draws attention to the 'travelling' quality of cultural memory its capacity to be remediated, translated, and recontextualised across different social and technological media and thus provides a conceptual basis for understanding how Urhobo proverbs might be preserved through digital and curricular remediation without necessarily losing their cultural vitality.

The UNESCO ICH Framework complements Cultural Memory Theory by providing an operational vocabulary and ethical-political orientation for the preservation of living cultural heritage. The Framework's emphasis on community-centred approaches — on heritage preservation as a process led by communities and groups who identify themselves as the custodians of that heritage is directly applicable to the Urhobo context, where questions of who owns oral traditions and who has the authority to document and transmit them are politically significant (Smith, 2006; Kurin, 2004). The Framework's concept of the 'viability' of intangible heritage its capacity to be

continuously practised and recreated provides the normative standard against which the preservation strategies proposed in this study are evaluated.

These two frameworks are further informed by insights from ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, and African philosophy. Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) offers a practical tool for assessing the degree to which Urhobo oral traditions are endangered, whilst Wiredu's (1996) African philosophical approach to indigenous knowledge systems provides the epistemological grounding for treating Urhobo oral traditions as legitimate knowledge systems rather than merely folkloric curiosities.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design grounded in ethnographic methodology. Ethnography was selected as the most appropriate approach given the study's focus on situated cultural practices proverb performance, oral narration, ritual speech — that cannot be adequately captured through survey instruments or experimental designs (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The ethnographic approach enabled the researcher to engage with participants in their natural social environments, observe oral traditions in performance, and develop nuanced, contextually grounded interpretations of the data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The study was conducted over a period of eight months, allowing for sustained immersion in the research communities and the development of trust relationships with participants. This extended engagement period is consistent with the methodological requirements of credible ethnographic research and enabled the collection of data across different social occasions market days, community meetings, ceremonial events, and everyday

household interactions at which proverbs and oral traditions were performed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.2 Study Population and Sampling

The study population comprised Urhobo community members residing in four purposively selected communities: Warri, Ughelli, Sapele, and Abraka. These communities were selected to provide representation of the range of urban–rural, riverine–agricultural, and academically–vocationally oriented contexts within Urhobo territory. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, targeting individuals identified by community leaders as knowledgeable in Urhobo oral traditions. The eligibility criteria were: (1) Urhobo ethnic identity; (2) age of forty years and above, to ensure participants had significant exposure to oral tradition transmission; (3) active participation in community cultural life; and (4) demonstrated familiarity with Urhobo proverbs and oral narratives. A total of sixty (60) participants were recruited across the four communities, comprising community elders, traditional rulers, herbalists/diviners, market women, and schoolteachers.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Three complementary data collection methods were employed. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all sixty participants individually, using an interview guide developed to elicit information on: the participant's personal repertoire of proverbs and oral narratives; the occasions and contexts in which oral traditions were performed; the mechanisms through which the participant had acquired their oral knowledge; their perceptions of threats to oral heritage; and their recommendations for preservation strategies. Interviews were conducted in Urhobo, with a research assistant providing translation where necessary, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

Second, four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted one per community each comprising eight to ten participants with mixed demographic profiles, to explore collective perspectives on oral heritage and group dynamics in proverb performance and interpretation. Third, participant observation was conducted throughout the fieldwork period, with field notes documenting proverb usage in naturally occurring social contexts including judicial proceedings, funeral rites, and community festivals.

3.4 Data Analysis

Interview and FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were organised and coded. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis procedure: familiarisation with the data; initial code generation; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. The coding process was iterative, with initial open codes grouped into focused codes and subsequently organised into five overarching themes. Member-checking was conducted by sharing preliminary interpretations with a subset of participants to validate the accuracy and cultural appropriateness of the researcher's interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of [Author's University]. All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, with all names replaced by codes in the final report. The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Nigerian Social Sciences Research Association and the Declaration of Helsinki.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Thematic Domains of Urhobo Proverbs and Their Cultural Functions

Analysis of the proverb corpus collected in this study identified six principal thematic domains through which Urhobo proverbs contribute to cultural heritage preservation. Table 1 presents a representative selection of proverbs from each domain, with Urhobo originals, English translations, and their identified cultural functions. Participants consistently emphasised that proverbs function simultaneously across

multiple domains — a single proverb may serve purposes of moral instruction, social cohesion, and historical memory simultaneously — reflecting the holistic, integrative character of Urhobo proverbial wisdom.

Table 1. Thematic Categories of Urhobo Proverbs and Their Cultural Functions

Thematic Category	Example Proverb (Urhobo)	English Translation	Cultural Function
Moral Instruction	<i>Oghene o gbẹ ẹkpọ, o gbẹ ẹkpọ re</i>	God does not cut the rope without reason	Ethical guidance and accountability
Social Cohesion	<i>Ẹvẹ ovo o rẹ oghere ẹde</i>	One finger cannot wash a face	Community interdependence
Conflict Resolution	<i>Akpọ rẹ ere oghuo o ti</i>	The world belongs to those who live in it	Peaceful coexistence
Environmental Wisdom	<i>Ẹvẹ ovo o rẹ ese ẹke</i>	One tree does not make a forest	Ecological awareness and conservation
Gender & Family	<i>Oghere ovo o gbẹ</i>	A single hand cannot clap	Complementary gender roles
Governance & Leadership	<i>Ọvie o rẹ ẹgbọ rẹ ovo</i>	A king does not rule alone	Collective leadership and consultation

Source: Field data, 2026.

The proverbs in Table 1 illustrate the breadth of cultural knowledge encoded in Urhobo oral traditions. Proverbs relating to moral instruction constituted the most frequently cited category (mentioned by

91.7% of participants), reflecting the primary function of oral traditions as instruments of ethical socialisation. Community Elder E1 from Ughelli elaborated:

"When we say 'God does not cut the rope without reason', we are teaching our children that every consequence follows from an action. This is not merely a saying — it is our law, our religion, and our philosophy combined into a single breath." (Elder E1, Ughelli, 2024)

Proverbs encoding social cohesion and community interdependence were the

second most cited category, appearing prominently in discussions of conflict

resolution and communal governance. The pervasive metaphorical use of body parts including fingers, hands, the face in proverbs of this category reflects the

Urhobo conceptualisation of community as an organic, interdependent whole in which individual isolation is both socially deviant and practically unsustainable.

4.2 Demographics of Participants and Patterns of Oral Knowledge

Table 2 presents the demographic profile of the sixty participants and identifies patterns in how different demographic groups relate

to oral tradition knowledge and transmission. The data reveal significant associations between age, occupational identity, and depth of oral heritage knowledge.

Table 2. Demographic Profile of Research Participants and Their Role in Oral Tradition

Category	Subcategory	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Role in Tradition
Gender	Male	34	56.7	Custodians, griots, elders
	Female	26	43.3	Storytellers, birth rite keepers
Age Group	40–55 years	20	33.3	Active tradition bearers
	56–70 years	25	41.7	Senior knowledge holders
	71 years and above	15	25.0	Repository of deep oral lore
Occupation	Traditional Rulers	8	13.3	Custodians of governance proverbs
	Community Elders	22	36.7	Moral arbiters
	Market Women	14	23.3	Everyday proverb transmitters
	Herbalists/Diviners	10	16.7	Ritual and medicinal lore
	Schoolteachers	6	10.0	Formal oral tradition educators
Location	Warri	18	30.0	Urban–rural interface
	Ughelli	16	26.7	Agricultural heartland
	Sapele	14	23.3	Riverine communities
	Abraka	12	20.0	Academic and rural crossroads

Source: Field data, 2026. N = 60.

As Table 2 illustrates, the oldest age cohort (71 years and above) constituted the deepest repositories of oral heritage knowledge, with participants in this group demonstrating the largest proverb repertoires and the most detailed knowledge of ritual narratives and

historical oral accounts. The significant predominance of male participants (56.7%) reflects both the traditional gendering of public proverbial performance and the methodological limitation of primary access routes through community leadership structures. Participants in the

40–55 age cohort showed noticeably less fluency in Urhobo proverbs than those in older cohorts, a finding that confirms the intergenerational transmission disruption identified in the literature (Odafe, 2011; Darah, 2005).

4.3 Threats to Oral Heritage: Participant Perceptions

Participants were asked to identify and rank the principal threats to the preservation of Urhobo oral traditions. Table 3 presents the threat factors identified by participants, together with perceived severity ratings and the frequency with which each threat was mentioned.

Table 3. Participant-Identified Threats to Urhobo Oral Heritage Preservation

Threat Factor	Perceived Severity	Respondents Identifying Threat (%)	Recommended Intervention
Western cultural assimilation	Very High	88.3	Cultural awareness campaigns
Decline of intergenerational transmission	High	81.7	Structured oral tradition mentorship
Language shift to English/Pidgin	High	78.3	Urhobo language revitalisation programmes
Urbanisation and rural exodus	Moderate–High	73.3	Community oral heritage festivals
Absence of formal documentation	High	76.7	Archival and digitisation initiatives
Religious change (Christianity/Islam)	Moderate	61.7	Interfaith cultural dialogue forums
Lack of institutional support	High	80.0	Government policy for heritage preservation
Youth disengagement	Very High	85.0	Integration into school curricula

Source: Field data, 2026. Percentages represent proportion of total participants (N = 60) identifying the threat.

Table 3 reveals a consistent pattern of perceived threat that converges with the literature. Western cultural assimilation was identified by the largest proportion of participants (88.3%) and rated at 'Very High' severity. Participants described the pervasive influence of Western popular culture mediated through social media, Nollywood films, and global music as

actively displacing indigenous cultural forms in the identity formations of young Urhobo people. Youth disengagement (85.0%) was the second most frequently identified threat, with participants expressing deep concern about the apparent disinterest of young people in learning proverbs, attending traditional ceremonies, or engaging with elder knowledge-holders.

Community Elder E4 from Warri offered the following reflection:

"Our grandchildren carry phones with them everywhere. They know more about American musicians than they know about our own proverbs. When I try to speak with them in Urhobo, they answer in English or Pidgin. The rope of our tradition is breaking — not all at once, but thread by thread." (Elder E4, Warri, 2024)

The absence of formal documentation frameworks (76.7%) was identified as a critical institutional failure. Multiple participants noted that no systematic effort had been made by governmental or academic institutions to record and archive Urhobo proverbs, oral narratives, or ritual performances. This finding is particularly alarming given that fifteen of the sixty participants were aged above sixty years and constituted primary repositories of deep oral knowledge that would be permanently lost upon their deaths.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm and extend several bodies of literature on

The demographic data in Table 2, demonstrating the concentration of deep oral heritage knowledge in the oldest age cohort, has profound implications for heritage management urgency. Drawing on Fishman's (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, the pattern of progressive reduction in oral heritage fluency across younger age cohorts suggests that Urhobo oral traditions are approaching a critical threshold of disruption, below which natural intergenerational transmission can no longer be relied upon to maintain the vitality of the tradition. The UNESCO (2003) Convention's concept of 'viability'

African oral traditions and intangible cultural heritage. The identification of six thematic domains in Urhobo proverbs aligns with and enriches Yankah's (1995) taxonomy of proverb functions, Gyekye's (1987) philosophical analysis of African proverb systems, and Darah's (2005) prior work on Urhobo oral literature. The multidimensional functionality of Urhobo proverbs simultaneously serving moral, social, ecological, historical, and governance functions corroborates the argument that oral traditions are not merely aesthetic performances but constitute comprehensive knowledge systems encoding the full range of a community's cultural intelligence (Vansina, 1985; Okpewho, 1992)

the capacity of living heritage to be continuously recreated appears to be under serious threat in the Urhobo context.

The threat pattern identified in Table 3 is broadly consistent with the literature on oral tradition endangerment in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa (Adeyemi & Adeyemi, 2014; Brock-Utne, 2000; Simons & Fennig, 2018). However, two findings deserve specific attention. First, the high rating assigned to the absence of formal documentation frameworks (76.7%) suggests that community members are acutely aware of the archival dimension of heritage preservation and are calling for institutional intervention. This finding

challenges assumptions that communities are passive recipients of externally driven heritage management programmes, demonstrating instead that Urhobo tradition-bearers are active agents with clear ideas about what preservation requires. Second, the identification of religious change as a moderately significant threat (61.7%) lower than many other factors suggests that the relationship between Christianity and oral traditions in Urhobo communities is more nuanced than simplistic narratives of religious erasure suggest. Several participants noted that certain proverbs and oral narratives had been recontextualised within Christian frameworks, pointing to processes of cultural hybridity and syncretism that warrant further scholarly investigation.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings lend strong empirical support to Assmann's (1992) theoretical distinction between communicative and cultural memory. The progressive weakening of intergenerational oral transmission evidenced by the declining fluency of younger age cohorts suggests that Urhobo oral traditions are at risk of failing to make the transition from communicative to cultural memory. The interventions proposed by participants — digital archiving, curricular integration, community cultural festivals — can be theoretically construed as attempts to institutionalise Urhobo oral heritage within cultural memory frameworks that can sustain it beyond the lifespan of currently living tradition-bearers.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has demonstrated that Urhobo proverbs and oral traditions function as sophisticated, multidimensional instruments of cultural heritage preservation, encoding moral philosophy, social governance, ecological wisdom, historical memory, and identity formation across six principal thematic domains. The findings further reveal that these oral

traditions face a convergent set of threats Western cultural assimilation, youth disengagement, language shift, religious transformation, and institutional neglect that collectively constitute a crisis of intangible cultural heritage in Urhobo communities.

On the basis of these findings, this study advances the following evidence-based recommendations.

First, the Delta State Government should establish a Urhobo Intangible Cultural Heritage Documentation Centre, mandated to conduct systematic oral heritage inventorying in accordance with the UNESCO (2003) Convention, with dedicated funding for audio-visual archiving of proverb performances, oral narratives, and ritual chants. Second, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) should collaborate with Urhobo cultural authorities to develop age-appropriate proverb and oral literature modules for integration into the Delta State primary and secondary school curriculum, taught through the medium of Urhobo language.

Third, community cultural festivals dedicated to oral performance modelled on existing events such as the Efe masquerade festival should receive government and private sector support as strategic platforms for intergenerational oral heritage transmission. Fourth, Nigerian universities with campuses in the Niger Delta particularly Delta State University, Abraka, and the University of Delta should establish dedicated Urhobo Oral Heritage Research Units empowered to conduct community-partnered documentation, analysis, and revitalisation research. Fifth, digital archiving platforms including dedicated websites, mobile applications, and social media channels should be developed in partnership with Urhobo diaspora communities to extend oral heritage access to geographically dispersed community members and to engage digital-native youth

with their cultural heritage in formats they regularly inhabit.

This study is not without limitations. The restriction of the sample to sixty participants across four communities, whilst appropriate for qualitative inquiry, limits the representativeness of the findings across the twenty-two Urhobo clans. Future research should employ larger, more geographically comprehensive samples and should extend the analysis to the women's oral tradition corpus, which remains significantly understudied. Longitudinal research tracking changes in oral heritage transmission patterns over time would also be a valuable contribution to the field.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study makes an original contribution to the growing body of literature on African intangible cultural heritage management by providing empirically grounded, community-centred evidence of both the richness of Urhobo oral heritage and the urgency of its preservation. The theoretical synthesis of Cultural Memory Theory and the UNESCO ICH Framework offered here constitutes a generalisable analytical approach applicable to oral heritage research across multilingual African societies.

Acknowledgements

The authors extend their deepest gratitude to all community elders, traditional rulers, and participants in Warri, Ughelli, Sapele, and Abraka who generously shared their knowledge, time, and oral heritage. Sincere thanks are also due to the community gatekeepers and research assistants who facilitated access and interpretation throughout the fieldwork period.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Abimbola, W. (1975). *Sixteen great poems of Ifa*. UNESCO.
- Abrahams, R. D. (2005). *Everyday life: A poetics of vernacular practices*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Achebe, C. (1964). *Arrow of God*. Heinemann.
- Adegbija, E. (2004). Language policy and planning in Nigeria. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 5(3), 181–246.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14664208.2004.10801162>
- Adeyemi, D. A., & Adeyemi, S. B. (2014). Nigeria and cultural heritage preservation: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3(11), 9–18.
<https://doi.org/10.18533/journal.v3i11.593>
- Agbasiere, J. T. (2000). *Women in Igbo life and thought*. Routledge.
- Aghalino, S. O. (2004). The Urhobo people and the Delta State government. *Journal of Applied Sciences*, 4(1), 14–20.
- Assmann, J. (1992). *Cultural memory and early civilisation: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bamgbose, A. (2000). *Language and exclusion: The consequences of language policies in Africa*. Lit Verlag.
- Battiste, M., & Henderson, J. Y. (2000). *Protecting indigenous knowledge*

- and heritage: A global challenge.* Purich Publishing.
- Berkes, F. (2012). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brock-Utne, B. (2000). *Whose education for all? The recolonisation of the African mind.* Falmer Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Crystal, D. (2000). *Language death.* Cambridge University Press.
- Darah, G. G. (1982). *Battles of songs: Udje tradition of the Urhobo.* CASS Publications.
- Darah, G. G. (2005). *Urhobo oral literature: A survey of primary sources and critical bibliography.* Urhobo Historical Society.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Diallo, A. (2019). Digital preservation of African oral traditions: Challenges and opportunities. *African Studies Quarterly*, 19(1), 44–61.
- Erll, A. (2011). *Memory in culture.* Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230321670>
- Finnegan, R. (2012). *Oral literature in Africa* (2nd ed.). Open Book Publishers. <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0025>
- Fishman, J. A. (1991). *Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages.* Multilingual Matters.
- Gyekye, K. (1987). *An essay on African philosophical thought: The Akan conceptual scheme.* Cambridge University Press.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory* (L. A. Coser, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1925)
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Isola, A. (2010). *Language, culture, and literary creativity in Africa.* Bookcraft.
- Kurin, R. (2004). Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the 2003 UNESCO Convention: A critical appraisal. *Museum International*, 56(1–2), 66–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-0775.2004.00459.x>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* SAGE Publications.
- Lord, A. B. (1960). *The singer of tales.* Harvard University Press.
- Mieder, W. (2004). *Proverbs: A handbook.* Greenwood Press.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. (1988). *The invention of Africa: Gnosis, philosophy, and the order of knowledge.* Indiana University Press.
- Nabofa, M. Y. (1994). *Urhobo religion and culture.* Spectrum Books.
- Ndimele, O. M. (Ed.). (2012). *Languages and cultures in Nigeria: A*

- festchrift for Okon Essien*. M & J Grand Orbit Communications.
- Nettle, D., & Romaine, S. (2000). *Vanishing voices: The extinction of the world's languages*. Oxford University Press.
- Norricks, N. R. (1985). *How proverbs mean: Semantic studies in English proverbs*. Mouton.
- Nsimbi, M. B. (1956). *Amannya amaganda n'ennono zaago*. East African Literature Bureau.
- Nwoye, A. (2011). The impact of colonialism on African cultures. *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, 3(5), 162–169.
- Nyembezi, C. L. S. (1954). *Zulu proverbs*. Witwatersrand University Press.
- Obiechina, E. (1975). *Culture, tradition and society in the West African novel*. Cambridge University Press.
- Odafe, P. A. (2011). *Women in Urhobo oral tradition: Gender, performance and social change* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Lagos.
- Ohwovoriola, J. E. (2009). Proverbial wisdom and social dynamics among the Urhobo. *Journal of Nigerian Languages and Culture*, 11(2), 78–95.
- Okpewho, I. (1979). *The epic in Africa: Toward a poetics of the oral performance*. Columbia University Press.
- Okpewho, I. (1992). *African oral literature: Backgrounds, character, and continuity*. Indiana University Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologising of the word*. Methuen.
- Onwuekwe, C. B. (2013). Proverbs and social governance in Niger Delta communities. *Delta Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5(1), 11–29.
- Opoku, K. A. (1975). *Speak to the winds: Proverbs from Africa*. Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Orubu, A. O. (2016). Women's oral traditions and gender identity among the Urhobo. *Journal of African Studies and Development*, 8(3), 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.5897/JASD2015.0340>
- Otite, O. (1973). *Autonomy and dependence: The Urhobo kingdom of Okpe in modern Nigeria*. Heinemann.
- Owusu-Ansah, F. E., & Mji, G. (2013). African indigenous knowledge and research. *African Journal of Disability*, 2(1), Article 30. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ajod.v2i1.30>
- Schipper, M. (2003). *Never marry a woman with big feet: Women in proverbs from around the world*. Yale University Press.
- Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2018). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (21st ed.). SIL International.
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. Routledge.
- Tanner, R. (2007). Globalization and African cultural identity. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 19(2), 219–231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696810701449975>
- Taylor, A. (1931). *The proverb*. Harvard University Press.

- Ukah, A. F. K. (2008). *A new paradigm of Pentecostal power: A study of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Nigeria*. Africa World Press.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO.
- Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. University of Wisconsin Press.
- Wakhungu, H. N. (2018). Digital archiving and African oral tradition. *Information Development*, 34(4), 357–368.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0266666917697898>
- Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural universals and particulars: An African perspective*. Indiana University Press.
- Yankah, K. (1995). *Speaking for the chief: Okyeame and the politics of Akan royal oratory*. Indiana University Press.