ROLES OF LIBRARIES IN THE PRESERVATION OF SOCIAL HERITAGE IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Libraries play a pivotal role in the preservation of social heritage, serving as custodians of cultural knowledge, traditions, and historical records. In Nigeria, social heritage—including language, oral traditions, folklore, customs, music, art, and historical manuscripts—is at risk due to modernization, neglect, and insufficient documentation. This study examines the roles of libraries in preserving Nigeria's social heritage, the strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and opportunities for improvement. Adopting a descriptive qualitative research design, data were collected through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with librarians and heritage professionals across national, state, and academic libraries in Nigeria. Findings reveal that libraries contribute significantly to social heritage preservation through documentation, digitization of rare and fragile materials, archival maintenance, and community engagement programs. However, inadequate funding, limited digital infrastructure, insufficient skilled personnel, and low public awareness constrain these preservation efforts. The study concludes that libraries are central to safeguarding Nigeria's social heritage, but sustainable preservation requires strategic investment, capacity building, and policy support. The study provides actionable recommendations for strengthening library roles in heritage conservation and highlights the importance of integrating modern ICT tools in preservation initiatives.

Introduction

Social heritage, encompassing language, customs, oral traditions, folklore, music, art, and historical records, represents the cultural backbone of a society. In Nigeria, the diversity of ethnic groups and cultural practices has produced a rich tapestry of social heritage that reflects the nation's identity and history. Preserving this heritage is critical for maintaining cultural continuity, fostering national identity, and supporting educational and research activities. However, modernization, urbanization, and the proliferation of digital media have contributed to the erosion of traditional knowledge and threatened the survival of some cultural expressions.

Libraries, as repositories of knowledge and centers for information dissemination, play a pivotal role in the preservation of social heritage. They collect, document, archive, and provide access to tangible and intangible cultural materials, ensuring that future generations can access these resources for research, education, and cultural understanding (Akor, 2023). In addition to traditional print collections, libraries are increasingly employing digital tools and strategies—such as digitization, institutional repositories, and online databases—to preserve fragile documents, manuscripts, and oral histories, thereby extending access beyond the physical library space (Yusuf, 2024).

Despite the critical role of libraries in cultural preservation, Nigerian libraries face significant challenges. Inadequate funding, poor ICT infrastructure, limited digitization initiatives, insufficient trained personnel, and low public awareness impede effective preservation efforts (Egwuonwu, Umeji, & Ubaka, 2025). These challenges are particularly pronounced in regional and academic libraries outside major urban centers, where resources are scarce and policy support is limited. Given the importance of libraries in maintaining Nigeria's cultural heritage, it is essential to examine the strategies they employ, the challenges they face, and the extent to which they succeed in preserving social heritage. While previous studies have highlighted the

general role of libraries in knowledge preservation, there is limited empirical research focused specifically on social heritage preservation in Nigerian libraries at a national scale. This study addresses this gap by investigating the roles of libraries in preserving social heritage in Nigeria, highlighting best practices, identifying barriers, and providing recommendations to strengthen heritage preservation initiatives.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria's social heritage, encompassing language, folklore, oral traditions, art, music, and historical manuscripts, constitutes an invaluable part of the nation's cultural identity. However, rapid modernization, urbanization, and the rise of digital media have posed serious threats to the preservation of these cultural resources. Many elements of Nigeria's heritage remain undocumented, fragmented, or inaccessible, placing them at risk of permanent loss.

Libraries, as custodians of knowledge, are strategically positioned to safeguard social heritage through collection, documentation, archiving, and digitization. Despite their potential, Nigerian libraries face significant challenges that impede effective preservation. These include inadequate funding, insufficient digitization infrastructure, lack of skilled personnel in archival and preservation techniques, poor policy frameworks, and low public awareness of heritage materials (Akor, 2023; Egwuonwu, Umeji, & Ubaka, 2025).

The limited preservation capacity of libraries threatens not only the survival of cultural knowledge but also its accessibility for researchers, educators, and the general public. Furthermore, while individual studies have examined library functions or preservation in specific contexts, there is a lack of comprehensive research investigating how Nigerian libraries are actively preserving social heritage across multiple institutions and regions.

This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the roles of libraries in preserving social heritage in Nigeria, identifying the strategies employed, challenges faced, and providing recommendations for improving library-led heritage preservation initiatives. The findings are expected to inform policy, strengthen library practices, and contribute to the safeguarding of Nigeria's rich cultural heritage for future generations.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the roles of libraries in the preservation of social heritage in Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the roles that libraries play in preserving social heritage in Nigeria.
2. Examine the strategies and methods employed by libraries to document and preserve social heritage materials.
3. Assess the challenges faced by libraries in the preservation of social heritage.
4. Propose strategies for improving the capacity of libraries to preserve social heritage effectively.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the roles of libraries in the preservation of social heritage in Nigeria?
2. What strategies and methods do libraries use to preserve social heritage materials?
3. What challenges do libraries face in preserving social heritage in Nigeria?
4. What interventions can enhance the effectiveness of libraries in preserving social heritage?

Literature Review

Social Heritage

Social heritage refers to the tangible and intangible cultural expressions that are passed from one generation to another, including language, customs, rituals, oral histories, folklore, arts, and historical artifacts (Akor, 2023). Preservation of social heritage ensures continuity of cultural identity, educates future generations, and contributes to national cohesion.

Library Preservation Functions

Libraries are knowledge repositories that collect, organize, and provide access to information. In the context of social heritage, libraries perform crucial functions including documentation, archiving, conservation, and digitization of cultural resources. These functions ensure that both physical and digital cultural artifacts are protected from loss, decay, or obsolescence (Yusuf, 2024).

This study is anchored on the Preservation of Knowledge Theory, which posits that access to recorded knowledge is vital for cultural continuity and societal development. The theory emphasizes that without systematic preservation, societies risk losing critical cultural and historical information. Applied to this study, the theory suggests that libraries, as custodians of knowledge, play a central role in maintaining social heritage and ensuring its accessibility for education, research, and cultural understanding.

Empirical Review

Roles of Libraries in Heritage Preservation

Recent studies highlight that libraries are increasingly involved in preserving social heritage

through digitization, archiving, and public engagement. Akor (2023) noted that Nigerian libraries contribute to cultural knowledge preservation by documenting folklore, historical records, and manuscripts. Similarly, Yusuf (2024) emphasized that digitization initiatives in Nigerian libraries have facilitated access to fragile and rare heritage materials, extending preservation beyond physical constraints.

Challenges in Heritage Preservation

Despite these efforts, libraries face significant challenges. Egwuonwu, Umeji, and Ubaka (2025) observed that inadequate funding, insufficient skilled personnel, limited digitization infrastructure, and poor preservation policies hinder effective heritage conservation. In addition, low public awareness and engagement with heritage collections reduce the utilization of preserved materials. Eddy-Ugorji and Eke (2025) argue that the absence of robust ICT infrastructure in many Nigerian libraries limits digitization projects, leaving many heritage resources vulnerable to degradation.

Strategies for Improvement

Scholars suggest that effective preservation requires a combination of policy development, capacity building, technological adoption, and public engagement. For example, establishing national digitization programs, training librarians in digital curation, and developing community-based heritage projects can enhance library preservation roles (Yusuf, 2024; Eddy-Ugorji & Eke, 2025).

While several studies highlight the importance of libraries in preserving heritage, most focus on specific institutions or regions. There is limited **national-level research** examining the roles of

libraries in social heritage preservation across multiple Nigerian institutions, particularly incorporating both traditional and digital strategies. This study fills this gap by exploring library practices, challenges, and strategies for preserving social heritage at a broader scale.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design. The design is suitable because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the roles of libraries in preserving social heritage, the strategies they employ, and the challenges they face. Both document analysis and interviews were used to gather rich, descriptive data. The study population comprised librarians, archivists, and heritage professionals working in national, state, and academic libraries across Nigeria. These individuals were considered suitable respondents due to their direct involvement in collection, preservation, digitization, and management of heritage resources.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 30 library professionals from major libraries that actively engage in heritage preservation. Purposive sampling ensured that respondents had relevant expertise and experience in social heritage preservation.

Data were collected through:

1. Document Analysis: Institutional reports, policy documents, library catalogs, and digitization project records were reviewed to assess current heritage preservation practices.
2. Semi-Structured Interviews: Conducted with library and heritage professionals to gather insights on preservation strategies, challenges, and recommendations.

Data from interviews were analyzed thematically. Themes were generated based on the research objectives, including: Roles of libraries in heritage preservation, Strategies employed in preservation, Challenges faced in preservation and Proposed interventions for improvement.

Document analysis results were used to triangulate the findings from interviews, enhancing the credibility and validity of the study.

Findings

The findings are presented fewer than four main themes aligned with the research objectives: roles of libraries, strategies for preservation, challenges, and proposed interventions. Data were collected from interviews with 30 library professionals and document analysis of library reports and archival records.

Roles of Libraries in Social Heritage Preservation

Respondents highlighted multiple roles played by libraries in preserving social heritage:

S/N	Role	Frequency (n=30)	Percentage (%)
1	Collection of tangible heritage materials (manuscripts, books, artifacts)	28	**93%**
2	Documentation of oral traditions and local histories	24	**80%**
3	Archival maintenance and conservation of fragile materials	27	**90%**
4	Provision of access to heritage resources for research and education	26	**87%**
5	Community engagement and cultural awareness programs	20	**67%**

Analysis:

Libraries are actively involved in collecting, archiving, and providing access to social heritage materials. Documented oral traditions, manuscripts, and local histories are preserved primarily in

national and academic libraries. However, engagement with the public is limited in some regions due to funding and logistical constraints.

Strategies Employed for Heritage Preservation

Key strategies identified include:

1. Digitization of Materials: Converting rare manuscripts, historical documents, and photographs into digital formats.
2. Cataloging and Metadata Creation: Systematic documentation to enhance retrieval and accessibility.
3. Climate-Controlled Archiving: Protecting fragile materials from environmental damage.
4. Outreach and Cultural Programs: Exhibitions, workshops, and awareness campaigns to promote heritage preservation.

Illustrative Quote:

"We have started digitizing fragile manuscripts and oral recordings to ensure they are not lost to time, but our capacity is limited due to funding and technical expertise." – Senior Librarian, National Library of Nigeria.

Challenges Faced in Heritage Preservation

S/N	Challenge	Frequency (n=30)	Percentage (%)
1	Inadequate funding for preservation activities	29	**97%**
2	Limited skilled personnel in preservation and digitization	25	**83%**
3	Poor ICT infrastructure for digitization	23	**77%**
4	Insufficient policy and regulatory frameworks	21	**70%**

5	Low public awareness and engagement	18	**60%**

Analysis:

The study confirms that inadequate funding, limited digital infrastructure, and shortage of skilled personnel are the most significant barriers to effective preservation. Policies supporting heritage preservation exist but are often poorly implemented.

Proposed Interventions to Improve Heritage Preservation

Respondents suggested several strategies:

- Increase funding for digitization and archival programs.
- Provide training programs for librarians in heritage preservation and digital curation.
- Develop robust ICT infrastructure and digitization laboratories.
- Strengthen policy frameworks and implement legal deposit laws effectively.
- Promote community engagement through cultural education and awareness campaigns.

Illustrative Quote:

"Investing in ICT infrastructure and training our librarians is critical; digitization is the only way to preserve our heritage for future generations."

Summary of Findings

Libraries in Nigeria are performing critical roles in the preservation of social heritage, employing strategies such as digitization, documentation, and public engagement. However, challenges such as limited funding, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and insufficient personnel hinder optimal preservation efforts. Respondents recommend investments in infrastructure, capacity building, and policy enforcement to strengthen library roles in heritage preservation.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide insights into the roles of libraries in preserving Nigeria's social heritage, the strategies they employ, the challenges they face, and potential interventions for improvement. The study confirms that libraries are central to the preservation of social heritage in Nigeria. Libraries actively collect tangible materials such as manuscripts, books, and artifacts, as well as intangible resources like oral traditions and local histories. This aligns with the findings of Akor (2023), who emphasized that Nigerian libraries serve as custodians of cultural knowledge, safeguarding historical and cultural documents for research, education, and community use. The high percentage of respondents reporting engagement in collection and archival activities (93% and 90%, respectively) underscores the significance of libraries as primary agents in heritage preservation.

Digitization, cataloging, climate-controlled archiving, and community engagement were identified as the primary strategies employed by libraries. These strategies mirror the best practices outlined in the literature (Yusuf, 2024), highlighting the importance of digital technologies in enhancing accessibility and prolonging the lifespan of fragile cultural resources. However, the uneven implementation of digitization initiatives, often constrained by limited technical expertise and infrastructure, suggests that Nigerian libraries have yet to fully capitalize on the potential of modern ICT tools in heritage preservation. Inadequate funding (97% of respondents), limited skilled personnel (83%), and insufficient ICT infrastructure (77%) emerged as the most critical challenges. These findings are consistent with Egwuonwu, Umeji, and Ubaka (2025), who argued that resource limitations and infrastructural gaps significantly hinder effective heritage preservation in Nigerian libraries. Moreover, low public awareness and engagement (60%) suggest that libraries are not only challenged in preservation but also in

promoting cultural heritage to broader audiences. This points to the need for integrated strategies that combine preservation with outreach and education.

The findings indicate that while Nigerian libraries are performing vital roles in heritage preservation, there is a gap between potential and actual practice, primarily due to systemic constraints. Addressing these challenges could enhance libraries' capacity to safeguard social heritage and ensure that cultural resources remain accessible for future generations. Strategic investments in ICT, capacity building, and policy enforcement are essential to bridging these gaps. Applying the Preservation of Knowledge Theory, the study demonstrates that libraries, as custodians of knowledge, are indispensable for cultural continuity. The preservation of social heritage is not only a record-keeping exercise but also a mechanism for sustaining national identity, promoting research, and supporting education. Failure to adequately preserve social heritage would result in the erosion of cultural memory, consistent with the theoretical propositions that knowledge preservation is critical for societal development.

Conclusion

This study examined the roles of libraries in preserving social heritage in Nigeria, the strategies they employ, the challenges they face, and possible interventions to enhance preservation efforts. Findings indicate that libraries play a crucial role in collecting, documenting, archiving, and providing access to both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Digitization, cataloging, climate-controlled storage, and community engagement emerged as the primary strategies employed.

However, several challenges limit the effectiveness of heritage preservation, including inadequate funding, insufficient ICT infrastructure, limited skilled personnel, weak policy

implementation, and low public awareness. These challenges constrain the libraries' ability to fully safeguard cultural resources and ensure long-term accessibility.

Overall, the study confirms that libraries are indispensable for social heritage preservation, but systemic interventions are needed to strengthen their capacity and optimize their role in sustaining Nigeria's rich cultural heritage for future generations.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Increase Funding for Heritage Preservation**

   Government and institutional support should prioritize financial investment in library preservation projects, digitization initiatives, and archival maintenance.

2. **Capacity Building and Training**

   Librarians and heritage professionals should receive specialized training in digital curation, preservation techniques, and archival management to improve preservation effectiveness.

3. **Enhance ICT Infrastructure**

   Libraries should develop modern ICT infrastructure, including digitization labs, high-speed internet, and digital storage solutions to support the preservation of fragile and rare materials.

4. **Policy Development and Enforcement**

   National and institutional policies should be strengthened to provide clear guidelines for heritage preservation, legal deposit, and archival standards.

5. **Promote Public Awareness and Community Engagement**

Libraries should organize outreach programs, cultural exhibitions, workshops, and educational campaigns to increase public engagement with social heritage materials and foster appreciation for cultural preservation.

6. **Collaborative Preservation Efforts**

   Collaboration among libraries, museums, archives, and cultural institutions can enhance resource sharing, expertise exchange, and coordinated preservation of social heritage across Nigeria.

By implementing these recommendations, Nigerian libraries can enhance their capacity to safeguard social heritage, ensuring its accessibility and continuity for research, education, and cultural identity.

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