

ARCHIVAL AND INFORMATION DOCUMENTATION PERSPECTIVES OF THE CULTURAL AND ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION OF THE OSUN-OSOGBO SACRED GROVE, OSOGBO, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study examined how archival and information documentation can support both the conservation and global accessibility of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage Site known for its cultural, ecological, and spiritual significance. Adopting a qualitative case study approach, the study draws on archival surveys, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and ethnographic observation. Thematic analysis was done through systematic coding of interview transcripts, archival inventories, and field notes to identify recurrent patterns in archival practice, conservation requirements, and local value systems. The study identified 152 related records, of which approximately 72 percent (n = 109) exist only in analogue format. These analogue holdings are categorized by minimal digitization efforts and the absence of standardized metadata frameworks, limiting both discoverability and lasting preservation. While the respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness regarding the Grove's heritage value and the significance of documentation, their technical capacity to implement modern archival and digital preservation standards was limited. Moreover, documentation of intangible cultural heritage, such as rituals, oral traditions, and performative practices, and of ecological data remains disconnected and inadequately integrated into existing record-keeping systems. The study claims that these deficiencies limit effective heritage management and limit meaningful international access to the site's documentary and informational resources. It recommends a coordinated digitization programme, targeted capacity-building initiatives for local custodians and institutional staff, and the development of a centralized, standards-based archival system. These measures are suggested as crucial for advancing sustainable heritage stewardship, enabling wider scholarly and public engagement with the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove.

Keywords: Archival Documentation, Heritage Conservation, Digital Preservation, Intangible Heritage, Sustainability, Osun Osogbo

Introduction

The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage Site is rich in biodiversity, sacred and unique landscapes, and culturally significant. It is also a pristine forest in southern Nigeria reputed to have served as spiritual refuge for the Yoruba people of old. Today, fragments of its historical significance is kept alive through yearly festivals, rituals, and oral traditions (Adewoyin et al. 2021). Studies frame it as a destination of choice for religious and cultural heritage tourists the world over (Oyeleye & Bigon, 2025). To protect its significance for generations unborn, the need arises for a systematic and deliberate documentation of its heritage.

Archival and information documentation could help to capture, organize, and preserve data about the Grove. It could provide access to needed information for management of and planning in the Grove (Lu & Ling, 2024). In this study, archival and information documentation is presented as capable of maintaining the Grove's history, associated cultural practices and ecological records. The study connects information documentation to environmental protection, cultural heritage management, and tourism development. The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove has been subjected to urban encroachment, environmental degradation, and persistent gaps in the documentation of its cultural and ecological attributes (Oyeleye & Bigon, 2025). Although indigenous knowledge systems has been a major way that the significance of the Grove had been preserved down the ages, however, it is informal. Besides,

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intergenerational shifts in cultural practice now constrain efforts to conserve the Grove's heritage. (Adewoyin et al., 2021; Seriah, 2024). Furthermore, application of archival and information documentation is limited. Available record is dispersed and not readily accessible. This, in turn endangers history, practices, and datasets. Lu and Ling (2024) posit that archival documentation conserve heritage, ensures that records, oral histories, culture and practices are preserved in enduring format useful for research, education, and policy development. This is evidently absent in the Osun-Osogbo Grove. The implication is possible threat to long-term knowledge transmission and a well-informed decision-making in managing the Grove.

This study therefore aims to examine how documentation and archiving can contribute to safeguarding the cultural, spiritual, and ecological heritage of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove. Its specific objectives are to:

- i. analyse how the Grove's cultural, spiritual, and ecological information is currently recorded, organized, and preserved;
- ii. investigate the ways in which documentation and archival practices can support the conservation of the Grove's heritage and ritual traditions; and
- iii. develop practical strategies for employing archival and information tools to protect and manage the Grove for future generations, including in relation to sustainable tourism.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. How is the cultural, spiritual, and ecological information of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove currently documented and preserved?
- ii. In what ways can documentation and archival practices support the conservation of the Grove's heritage and traditional practices?
- iii. What strategies can be implemented using archival and information tools to enhance the protection, management, and sustainable tourism of the Grove?

This study examines archival collections, ecological surveys, oral histories, and tourism-related documentation on the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, with the scope limited to practices that bear directly on sustainable heritage management. Using Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove as a case study provides a basis for strategies that could be reenacted with other heritage sites.

The study enhances scholarship in cultural preservation, ecology, and archival documentation., which could suggest way forward for other UNESCO Heritage sites. SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), SDG 15 (Life on Land), are directly related to this study. Therefore, this study could enhance the capacity of our institutions and thus promote tourism, heritage conservation, and biodiversity protection.

Literature Review

Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove

The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove has elicited plethora of scholarly interest over the years. Adewoyin et al. (2021) examine the environmental ethics and religious taboos governing the Grove, and posit that such prohibitions have historically functioned as mechanisms for biodiversity protection. Therefore, they concluded that spiritual injunctions, when reinforced through communal monitoring and sanctions, constitute an indigenous system of environmental governance. Adeyemi and Oyinloye (2020) concluded that religious practice and sacralization of space contribute to ecological equilibrium. Akinsete and Ajala (2022) emphasize both the attributed healing properties of the river and the indigenous knowledge practices that inform local water management, but question whether construing the river as a sacred entity enhances conservation-minded behaviour. They argue further that where it does, the resilience of such belief-based systems may not stand the test of time. Extending the discussion further, Okafor et al. (2025) employ geospatial methods to investigate biodiversity conservation within landscapes shaped by African Traditional Religion in southeastern Nigeria.

Archival and Information Documentation Approaches

Archival and information documentation is dynamic. In recent decades, it engages with digital technologies, pedagogy, and cross-disciplinary collaboration, thereby offering a productive set of approaches for heritage environments such as the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove. Araújo (2020) demonstrates that tools such as digitization, artificial intelligence, and robotics can enhance the preservation and management of complex cultural collections. This interdisciplinary framing is particularly pertinent for the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove where material artefacts,

oral traditions, ritual performances, ecological datasets, and visitor-generated media coexist and interact. In this context, archival and information documentation are not static repositories but connective infrastructures that bridge the gap between knowledge production, access, and reuse across research, community, and policy domains (Araújo 2020). Marciano et al. (2018) and Lemieux and Marciano (2025) argue that archival education must integrate computational competencies and critical data literacies in order to prepare practitioners to work with large, heterogeneous, and often multimodal datasets. Zhou et al. (2025) propose organization of multimodal resources that employs deep learning to link images, audio, text, and metadata. Marciano et al. (2018) acknowledge institutional responsibilities for stewardship, but they provide limited guidance on how to operationalize these responsibilities in ways that centre indigenous and local custodianship, enable equitable benefit sharing, and address long-term storage and maintenance costs.

Methodology

The research design for this study is qualitative, using Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove as a case study. Interviews, document analysis, ethnographic observation and survey of existing archival documentation was employed in this study. Digital and physical records of the grove, museum records, and related information in available repositories were examined. Festival records and scholarly literature on the grove were also examined. Informed consent of stakeholders interviewed were sought and information provided during the interview were used strictly for the purpose of this study and treated with confidentiality. The resulting data were thematically analysed.

Results and Discussion

The study investigated the integration of archival and information documentation approaches into the cultural and ecological conservation of the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove. The results are presented thematically, supported by visual data representations.

Existing Archival Resources

152 discrete heritage-related items were documented and surveyed, across four principal repositories: the Osun-Osogbo Heritage Office, the Ibadan branch of the National Archives, the Osogbo Museum, and privately maintained community collections. Table 1 summarizes the allocation of these materials by record type and holding institution.

Table 3.1: Distribution of Archival Materials by Type and Location

Record Type	Heritage Office	National Archives	Museum	Private Collections	Total
Festival Photographs	24	12	8	16	60
Ritual Scripts, Oral Texts, and Scholarly Documents (e.g., research papers, presentations, speeches)	10	5	4	12	31
Biodiversity Data	8	2	0	0	10
Administrative Records	9	14	6	0	29
Artifacts Documentation	0	0	12	10	22
Total	51	33	30	38	152

Source: Field Study 2025

After analysis, result showed that 72% (n = 109) of the materials were in analogue format, while only 28% (n = 43) had been digital format. The majority of the digital records were stored on non-standardized media and were not accompanied by adequate metadata.

Stakeholder Perceptions

Interview data from 25 stakeholders were examined thematically. The sample comprised heritage managers (n = 6), traditional custodians (n = 5), tourism practitioners (n = 4), researchers and academics (n = 5), and community members (n = 5). The analysis produced four major themes that shed light on concerns and positions regarding archival and information documentation related to the Grove among stakeholders.

Theme 1: Fragmented and Uncoordinated Documentation Structures

Participants identified the lack of an integrated archival framework as a major setback to effective heritage management. Existing materials were reported to be scattered across multiple institutions and private repositories, which limit accessibility, cataloguing, and coherence. Heritage managers and academic researchers unanimously agree that this fragmentation undermines institutional memory, complicates longitudinal analysis, and constrains systematic conservation planning. The theme points to a structural deficit in the governance of heritage information, showing that inadequate documentation infrastructures endanger cultural continuity and long-term ecological monitoring at the Grove.

Theme 2: Vulnerability of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Traditional custodians and community members emphasized the growing endangerment of intangible cultural heritage, including oral histories, ritual practices, and esoteric knowledge. They attributed this erosion to intergenerational discontinuities, transformations in belief systems, and declining participation in customary practices. While many respondents acknowledged the potential value of recording such knowledge, they stressed that any documentation must adhere to culturally grounded protocols, particularly with respect to sacred or restricted information. The theme therefore exposes a tension between the perceived necessity of recording intangible heritage for future generations and the obligation to protect its integrity, confidentiality, and culturally embedded meanings.

Theme 3: Constraints on Digital Documentation Capacity

A substantial proportion of participants (68%) reported limited competence and resources for digital preservation and documentation. Key barriers included inadequate training in digital methods, insufficient technological infrastructure, and weak institutional support mechanisms. Tourism practitioners and heritage officials argued that the lack of digitized collections diminishes the Grove's educational, interpretive, and outreach potential, both locally and internationally. This theme underscores that the transition from paper-based or informal records to robust digital systems is not merely a technical upgrade but requires sustained investment in skills development, infrastructure, and organizational support.

Theme 4: Documentation as a Strategic Instrument for Sustainable Heritage Management

Most participants (84%) considered the systematic integration of archival and information documentation into heritage management as fundamental to improving conservation outcomes. Documentation was seen as essential for evidence-informed policy formulation, enhanced research accessibility, enriched interpretive materials for visitors, and increased global visibility of the Grove. Stakeholders characterized documentation not only as an operational task but as a strategic instrument that links environmental stewardship with cultural continuity and socio-economic opportunities, including carefully managed tourism. At the same time, participants highlighted unresolved issues concerning data governance, intellectual property, and the safeguarding of sacred knowledge, indicating that documentation practices must be negotiated through inclusive, context-sensitive frameworks.

Cross-cutting Implications

Taken together, these themes reveal a pronounced discrepancy between the widely acknowledged value of documentation and its limited institutionalization in current heritage practice. Structural fragmentation, constrained digital capacity, and ethical concerns regarding the treatment of sensitive knowledge collectively inhibit the translation of documentation ideals into practice. Addressing these interrelated challenges is crucial for securing the Grove's long-term ecological, cultural, and spiritual significance. Doing so will require coordinated documentation infrastructures, capacity-building in digital preservation, and participatory protocols that respect cultural authority while enabling sustainable and ethically grounded knowledge management.

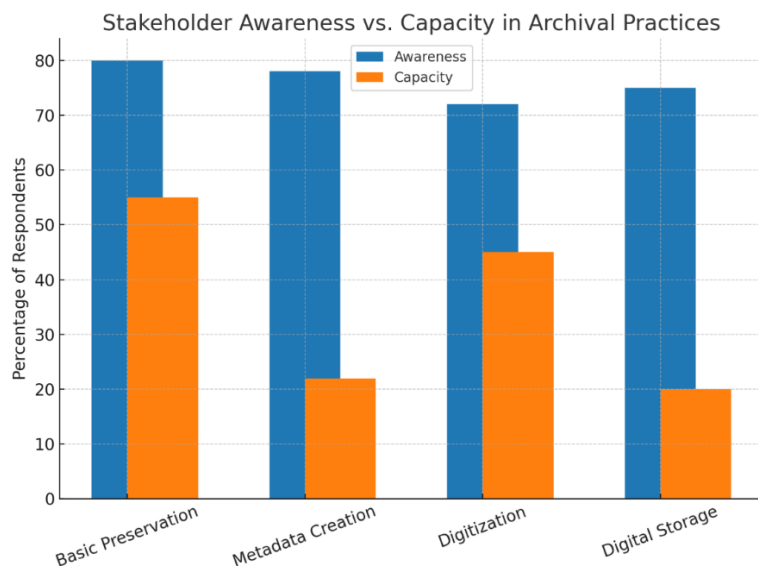


Figure 1: Stakeholder Awareness vs. Capacity in Archival Practices

Source: Field Study

X-axis = Archival Skills Categories (Basic Preservation, Metadata Creation, Digitization, Digital Storage), Y-axis = % Respondents with Skill. Two bars per category: Awareness (blue), Actual Capacity (orange).]

The gap between awareness and capacity was most pronounced in metadata creation and digital storage, where fewer than 25% of respondents had practical competence despite more than 75% being aware of its importance.

Observations of Intangible Heritage Documentation

Ethnographic observation during the annual Osun-Osogbo Festival revealed that while extensive photographic and video documentation was undertaken by both professionals and community members, no coordinated system existed to archive these materials. Figure 2 shows the observed flow of cultural data from creation to storage.

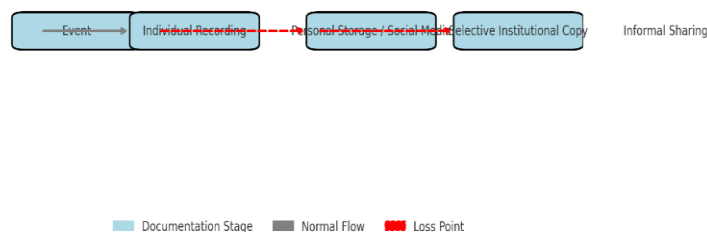


Figure 2: Current Flow of Cultural Documentation

Source: Field Study

Event → Individual Recording → Personal Storage / Social Media → Selective Institutional Copy → Informal Sharing. Arrows indicate loss points where materials are not archived.]

This unstructured approach led to significant data loss; an estimated 40% of recordings from the 2023 festival were not retrievable six months after the event.

Gaps in Ecological Data Archiving

Although biodiversity surveys have been conducted periodically by environmental agencies and researchers, their integration into the heritage management database was non-existent. Table 2 shows the frequency of ecological data collection and archival integration.

Table 2: Biodiversity Data Collection and Archival Integration

Year Range	Ecological Surveys Conducted	Integrated into Heritage Records	Percentage Integrated
2010–2014	6	1	16%

Year Range	Ecological Surveys Conducted	Integrated into Heritage Records	Percentage Integrated
2015–2019	8	2	25%
2020–2024	5	1	20%

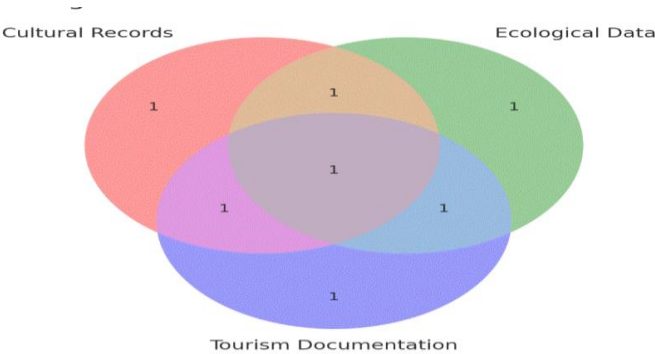
Source: Field Study (2025)

The results indicate a persistent disconnect between scientific ecological monitoring and cultural heritage recordkeeping.

Proposed Integrated Archival Framework

Drawing on literature and stakeholder input, an integrated archival framework was developed to bridge cultural, ecological, and tourism data management. Figure 3 illustrates the model.

Figure 3.1. Proposed Integrated Archival Framework



The proposed model has three domains that are interrelated namely; Cultural Records, Ecological Data, and Tourism Documentation. They form a central "Integrated Digital Archive." This central archive has shared metadata standards, clearly articulated community access protocols, and robust long-term preservation policies. These elements provide the infrastructural and governance basis for a coherent documentation system.

This aligns with UNESCO’s guidelines for heritage documentation and contributes directly to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 15 (Life on Land), and 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). It does so by integrating cultural and environmental records, strengthening institutional capacity for stewardship, and enhancing transparency and accessibility of heritage-related information.

The analysis of existing practices and resources supports the following conclusions:

- i. Archival materials relevant to the Grove are substantial but dispersed across institutions and formats. This dispersion is compounded by low levels of digitization and a lack of harmonized descriptive and technical standards, leading to limited discoverability and interoperability.
- ii. Key stakeholder groups express broad agreement on the importance of integrating archival holdings. However, they face significant capacity gaps in areas such as metadata schema design, digital curation workflows, and secure, scalable storage infrastructures, which collectively inhibit effective implementation.
- iii. Intangible cultural heritage, particularly materials related to local festivals and ritual practices, is subject to accelerated loss due to inadequate documentation, dependence on oral transmission, and the absence of systematic audiovisual recording and preservation strategies.
- iv. Ecological monitoring datasets, such as biodiversity inventories, land-use records, and environmental impact assessments, remain weakly connected to cultural heritage collections. This lack of integration limits the potential for holistic analyses that link ecological change to cultural practices, governance arrangements, and community narratives.

v. A coordinated, integrated archival framework that brings together cultural, ecological, and tourism-related documentation within a shared digital environment offers a viable and sustainable strategy for the Grove's long-term conservation. By aligning technical standards, institutional responsibilities, and community-based access and consent protocols, such a framework can enhance resilience of both cultural and ecological knowledge systems and support evidence-based management and policy-making.

Discussion

The study shows that relevant materials are scattered across the Osun-Osogbo Heritage Office, the National Archives in Ibadan, the Osogbo Museum, and privately held community collections. Majority of the 152 distinct records identified are in analogue formats, and digitization activities have been largely uncoordinated. Many items such as ritual scripts, festival performances, and other embodied practices, lack core descriptive, administrative, and technical elements required for reliable discovery, long-term preservation, and interoperability. In the absence of an integrated archival infrastructure, significant portions of cultural data, especially audiovisual materials generated during annual festivals, are lost within short periods due to inadequate storage, reliance on personal devices, and ephemeral circulation on social media without subsequent ingest into any formal repository (Liu et al., 2023). While survey data indicate a relatively high level of awareness regarding the value of archival work, a substantial skills deficit in areas such as digital preservation workflows, standards-based metadata creation, and systematic cataloguing is evident. The adoption of established metadata schemas, such as Dublin Core or Encoded Archival Description (EAD), with controlled vocabularies and authority files suited to Yoruba cultural heritage will enhance digital repository platforms that ensure both preservation-grade storage and differentiated access for various user communities (Li et al., 2024).

Incorporating ecological information, such as biodiversity inventories, habitat assessments, and environmental monitoring records, into the same archival ecosystem would position it as integral to the Grove's overall heritage narrative. Similarly, tourism-related records, including visitor statistics, destination image studies, interpretive materials, and photographic collections, can be structured within the digital repository. This must align technical infrastructures with participatory governance (van der Sande & van der Sluijs, 2024). Digitization should proceed according to explicit selection policies, technical standards, and preservation protocols that address authenticity, provenance, and long-term usability. A clearly articulated governance model is required, delineating roles and responsibilities among heritage authorities, archival professionals, and community-based custodians. Training of local custodians and staff in analogue conservation techniques and digital curation skills, such as file format management, storage planning, rights management, and the application of metadata standards is key to this. Finally, appropriately regulated controlled-access platforms can broaden scholarly and public engagement, reinforce local attachment to the site, and strengthen the Grove's visibility in heritage, conservation, and tourism networks.

Conclusion

From this study, the conclusion is that absence of structured and organized information and archival documentation in the Osun-Osogbo sacred grove is evident. This threatens the sustainability of the grove in the long run. The study emphasized the importance of information and archival documentation, and stakeholders attested to this. However, existing efforts at documentation is limited and uncoordinated. As shown by the findings of this study, the introduction of archival and information documentation in the grove will enhance, heritage preservation, transmission of indigenous knowledge, and informed tourism decision making which will strengthen tourism development in the grove. By encouraging and introducing documentation in heritage governance of Osun-Osogbo sacred grove, ecological values can be safeguarded in ways that advance environmental integrity, cultural continuity, and social well-being over the long term.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to strengthen the documentation, conservation, and global accessibility of the Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove.

With respect to the first objective, examining how the Grove's cultural, spiritual, and ecological information is currently recorded and preserved, a periodic, methodical audit of existing archival resources should be instituted at and reviewed every two years. This audit should encompass both institutional and community-based repositories. The study further recommends a centralized, continuously updated inventory system accessible to relevant stakeholders.

In relation to the second objective, documentation should be woven into the fabric of conservation planning and management. A digital repository for the grove is recommended.

Addressing the third objective, the study recommended coordinated capacity development, and participatory governance. This will require training programme for heritage professionals, researchers, and community custodians. Concurrently, participatory documentation approaches should be institutionalized to enable local communities to contribute materials, oral histories, and interpretations that reflect indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences, thereby mitigating the risk of externally imposed or homogenized narratives. To enhance global accessibility and responsible tourism value, the central repository should provide a multilingual user interface, curated virtual representations of key sites and practices within the Grove (e.g., virtual tours, 3D models, and annotated media), and open-access datasets, subject to appropriate ethical and cultural protocols, that support research, education, and conservation initiatives. These measures would not only increase the Grove's visibility and interpretive richness but also position documentation as a central instrument in its long-term protection and sustainable use.

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