



Preserving African Heritage: Curatorial and Public Perspectives on Conservation, Tourism, and Repatriation of Artefacts at the National Museum, Benin City, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Museums serve as vital institutions for preserving a society's cultural heritage and identity, preventing its erosion or extinction, a pressing concern for most African nations. The study examines the National Museum Benin City's role in this endeavor, assessing its curatorial and public perspectives on conservation, tourism, and artifact repatriation. Drawing on historical sources, ethnographic fieldwork including researcher observation at the museum, interviews with museum curators, the locals and museum visitors. The study adopts a mixed method approach of data collection employing both semi-structured interviews and questionnaire surveys. Collected data were evaluated using NVivo 15 analytical software and through descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that despite the museum's contributions to cultural tourism, education, and repatriation advocacy, it faces persistent challenges including funding gaps, infrastructural limitations, inadequately trained personnel and slow repatriation efforts. The study concludes that the National Museum Benin City's can establish a replicable model for heritage preservation by formalizing community-museum partnerships, sustainable funding, investing in comprehensive staff training, as well as improving its efforts for repatriation of cultural artefacts and greater collaboration between the museum and tour agencies for its tourism development.

Keywords: African Heritage, Benin City, Cultural Preservation, Cultural Identity, Museums, Repatriation, Tourism.

INTRODUCTION

Heritage preservation is the heartbeat of cultural continuity, acting as both a mirror to the past and a compass to drive a people to the future. Nowhere is this more critical than in Africa, where centuries of illicit trafficking of cultural resources, the advent of colonialism and under-resourced institutions have jeopardized her tangible and intangible expressions of cultural identity. These cultural heritages are crucial for the identity, unity, and historical consciousness of African societies. Museums serve as critical institutions for preserving, interpreting, and showcasing these heritages to both local and international audiences. The role of museums extends beyond the collection of historical artifacts; they serve as educational hubs, tourist attractions, and repositories of national identity. However, the extent to which museums in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, have successfully preserved and promoted cultural heritage remains a subject of considerable academic discourse (Sogbesan, 2022). The National Museum in Benin City, Edo State, stands out as one of Nigeria's most significant heritage institutions. Established in 1973, the Benin museum is famous for its broad collection of bronze, ivories,

sculptures and other historical artifacts that reflect the artistic and cultural sophistication of the ancient 12th century Benin Empire. The museum serves as a center for cultural education and historical research, providing insight into the history of the people of Edo and the history of the broad cultural narratives of Nigeria. Given the rich history and role of Benin as the center of trade and diplomacy before the British colony, the museum plays an important role in preserving the legacy of the Benin Empire. However, like many museums across Africa suffer from poor conservation due to limited awareness, insufficient government support, and the perception that museums are only for historical artifacts instead of dynamic centers for learning and cultural promotion with touristic value (Fogelman, 2008; Chirikure, 2013). The history of the Benin Empire is one of rich cultural heritage and artistic excellence, but also of cultural loss and colonial exploitation. The infamous 1897 British punitive campaign against the Benin Kingdom looted thousands of Benin artifacts, which were later taken to European Museums and Private Collections. Today, these artworks are scattered across foreign institutions such as the British Museum in London, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and Humbolt Forum in Berlin. This collective looting of Benin's cultural heritage has raised significant debate on the morality and role of museums of evidence in restoring cultural ownership to indigenous communities.

The National Museum Benin City, despite its significance, has struggled to reclaim many of these looted artifacts, highlighting broader issues of neocolonial cultural dominance and the politics of heritage restitution (Oriakhogba, 2022). The National Museum Benin City and many Nigerian museums have often been faced with limited government support, under resourced with the right professional expertise and inadequate public engagement which undermine their core mission. Additionally, the standard of museums in Nigeria is relatively low compared to global standards, with partially poor awareness, insufficient tourism propagation and limited integration of national educational course (Eyo, 1994). As a result, public awareness remains low, visitor services and promotional efforts are underdeveloped, and the integration of museum content into national educational curricula is inconsistent. These challenges have obstructed the capacity of the Nigerian museums, which work as effective cultural institutions capable of educating the younger generation and promoting cultural tourism (Bankole, 2013). Despite these challenges, the museum is an important institution to promote national identity and cultural pride. In recent years, interest in disintegrating African museums and reviving their role in society is increasing (Agorsah, 1977; Eyo, 1994; Loach et al., 2017). Efforts to digitize the museum collection, integrate local communities under heritage protection and promote cultural tourism have gained momentum. The demand for restitution evidence, with African governments, scholars and activists advocating the withdrawal of stolen cultural goods from Western institutions has also intensified. These developments offer an opportunity for African museums, including the National Museum Benin City, to redefine their role in cultural protection and national development (Emifoniye, 2023).

Therefore, the study investigates how the National Museum, Benin City navigates these intersecting challenges in conservation, tourism, and repatriation, drawing on the firsthand insights of museum curators, conservation staff, the local community, and tourists. Through ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and survey data analyzed with NVivo and descriptive statistics, Specifically, the study seeks to;

The study aims to fill these gaps by providing an in-depth analysis of how the National Museum, Benin City contributes to heritage preservation and emphasize the need for tourism growth. Moreso, the study contributes to a broader discourse on cultural repatriation and the ethical considerations surrounding stolen African artifacts. While many Western museums continue to resist returning looted objects, there is increasing advocacy for restitution. This research will contribute to discussions on how Nigerian museums can be better positioned to receive, conserve, and exhibit repatriated artifacts. Furthermore, the study will explore ways to improve museum engagement with local communities, educational institutions, and tourists, which can ultimately lead to increased funding and infrastructural development for heritage institutions in Nigeria (Yusuf & Akande, 2023). From an academic perspective, this study will provide valuable insights into the role of museums in nation-building and cultural sustainability.

Research Objectives

1. To evaluate the technical protocols and traditional methods employed to stabilize and restore repatriated artefacts.
2. Assess public perspective of how the museum's cultural education shapes their understanding and appreciation of Benin and African heritage.
3. Investigate the extent to which the museum has been involved in the repatriation and restitution of stolen Benin artifacts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Review

The theoretical framework in this study is anchored on the Cultural Capital Theory (Bourdieu, 1986), supplemented by insights from Heritage Tourism and Repatriation Discourse. It provides an educational lens through which the study analyzes the importance of museums in cultural protection, education, identity formation and tourism development.

Cultural Capital Theory

The Cultural Capital Theory, developed by Pierre Bourdieu in 1986, is a sociological structure that explains how cultural knowledge, artifacts, traditions and institutional practices contribute to social stratification and identity formation (Hyypä, 2010). Bourdieu introduced the concept of cultural capital non-economic resources, acquired through education, cultural institutions, and heritage conservation and social education, cultural institutions and inheritance conservation. As a patron of museums, cultural artifacts and historical narratives play an important role in maintaining cultural capital by preserving, displaying and educating people about heritage (Jacob, 2019). In terms of African heritage, the National Museum Benin city serves as an institutional form of the cultural capital, housing artifacts that symbolizes the historical and artistic achievements of the Benin Empire. These artifacts, including the famous Benin bronze, embodies the knowledge, skills and values of the Edo people, which are passed through generations (Jeffreys, 1951). Hyypä, (2010) argues that access to cultural capital provides individuals with symbolic and intellectual resources that increase their social status. Museums act as educational institutions that expose visitors to historical knowledge, artistic expressions and indigenous traditions, thus enriching their cultural literacy (Todino & Campitiello, 2025). In Nigeria, economic obstacles, lack of museum awareness, and especially among the general public, limiting the reach of museums for marginalized communities (Areo, 2014). To address this, government and cultural institutions must invest in community

outreach programs, digital exhibitions and educational partnerships that make museums more inclusive and accessible to all Nigerians. The cultural capital theory provides a relevant outline to understand the impact of museums on African heritage protection. It underlines the importance of museums as a transmitter of historical and artistic knowledge, highlighting the need for equitable access to cultural institutions

Empirical Studies

A study by Kilba (2024) discovered the importance of museums in preserving Nigerian cultural heritage. Research conducted in five National Museums, including the National Museum Benin City, found that museums serve as important institutions to protect indigenous artifacts, oral traditions and historical narratives. The study emphasized that without proper conservation efforts, many traditional artifacts may deteriorate or be lost due to poor handling, theft, or illegal smuggling. The findings underlined the need for money and government support to increase museum conservation techniques. Emifoniye, (2023) examined the educational role of museums in Nigeria, using the National Museum Benin City as a case study. His study found that museums work as informal educational places where students, researchers and tourists gain knowledge about the history and cultural diversity of Nigeria. However, the study revealed that insufficient infrastructure, limited access to digital resources, and inadequate collaboration with educational institutions limits the capacity of the museum as an academic center. A comparative study by Fogelman (2008) analyzed the impact of museums on cultural identity formation in Ghana and Nigeria. The study revealed that the museums play an important role in strengthening national and ethnic identity by preserving historical artifacts and narrating indigenous history. For example, in Benin City, the exhibition of Benin Bronzes serves as a powerful symbol of Edo heritage, strengthening communal relations and historical consciousness among the local population. However, the study states that many African museums struggle with low visitor engagement due to poor public awareness and accessibility challenges. A research study by Oluwole (2019) assessed the role of museums in tourism development in Nigeria. His study has shown that the museums attract a large number of local and international tourists and can serve as a catalyst for the state of the national museum Benin city for visitors interested in the history of the Benin city of Benin Kingdom. The study stated that while museums contribute to cultural tourism, their economic capacity is often reduced due to insufficient promotional strategies and infrastructure deficiency. Authors recommended strategic marketing, digital exhibitions and public-private partnership to promote tourism revenue from museums. Another study by Abungu, (2005) examined the challenges faced by museums in Africa, focusing on funding, management and public engagement. The study found that many museums, including the National Museum Benin City, suffer from lack of funding, insufficient conservation facilities and limited human resources. Research further recognized that political instability and policy neglect have hindered the development of the museum in Nigeria. The study called for legislative reforms and increased financial investment to strengthen museum operations and conservation efforts. A recent study by Onuoha (2019) detected the government and institutional support for museums in Nigeria. The study analyzed the role of the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM) in promoting cultural heritage protection. Conclusions indicated that while NCMM has made efforts to preserve historical artifacts and improve the museum infrastructure, bureaucratic obstacles and obstructed progress due to inconsistent policy implementation. The study recommended stronger policy frameworks, international collaborations, and community involvement in museum management. These empirical studies collectively highlight the significance of

museums in preserving African heritage, educating the public, promoting tourism, and fostering cultural identity. However, they also reveal major challenges, including inadequate funding, limited technological integration, and poor public awareness, which need to be addressed to enhance the role of museums in cultural preservation.

Conceptual Literature

In exploring the subject of this study, the conceptual review is structured around four interconnected components: African heritage, cultural protection, tourism development and restoration of heritage evidence. These components are necessary to understand how the National Museum Benin City contributes to the preservation, promotion, repatriation and restoration of African Cultural Heritage.

African Heritage and Role of Museums in Cultural Preservation

African heritage is a broad and multifaceted concept that encompasses the tangible and intangible cultural elements that define the history, identity, and legacy of African societies. Tangible heritage includes physical artifacts such as ancient sculptures, masks, textiles, pottery and architectural structures, while abstract heritage includes oral traditions, language, folklore, music, dance and indigenous knowledge system. According to UNESCO (2021), heritage acts as a bridge, which combines previous civilizations with current and future generations, ensuring cultural continuity and identity protection. The importance of African heritage lies in its role as a stock of collective identity, a store of historical knowledge and a tool to promote unity and social harmony. Museums serve as important institutions for conservation, interpretation and spread of cultural heritage. They provide a platform for collections, conservation and exhibitions of artifacts, ensuring that the cultural heritage is safe for future generations. In the African context, museums are more than mere repositories of artifacts; They are the location for education, research and cultural identity reinforcement (Idris et al., 2023). For example, the National Museum plays an important role in preserving the historical and artistic heritage of Benin City, Benin Kingdom and Nigerian heritage, showing artifacts describing the pre-colonial history and artistic traditions of the region. One of the primary functions of museums in cultural protection is the documentation and restoration of artifacts. Museums organize exhibitions, seminars, and cultural events to educate visitors about the significance of African heritage. These programs foster a sense of pride and cultural awareness among citizens, particularly the younger generation, who may otherwise be disconnected from their ancestral traditions.

Role of the National Museum Benin City in Artifact Repatriation and Tourism Development

Seen as a cultural institution of immense cultural and historical significance, the National Museum Benin City attracts tourists from around the world eager to explore the rich heritage of the ancient Benin Kingdom. The museum serves as a gateway to the cultural, artistic, and historical legacies of the Edo people, showcasing artifacts such as the renowned Benin Bronzes, ivory carvings, and terracotta sculptures. The National Museum Benin City play a significant role in tourism activities in the region contributing significantly to the local economy by generating revenue from entrance fees, guided tours, and cultural exhibitions. The influx of tourists supports local hospitality services such as transportation hotels, and restaurants thereby boosting socio-economic growth and providing livelihoods for residents in Benin City and its surrounding communities. Moreover, the museum's cultural tourism initiatives also help in raising awareness about the historical significance of Benin and Nigeria's cultural

heritage of the past, promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation among global audience. In addition, Museums often serve as custodians of repatriated artifacts, especially when cultural treasures are returned to their country of origin after being unlawfully removed or acquired (Lundén, 2016). In recent years, there has been growing advocacy for the return of looted African artifacts from European and American museums. The Benin Bronzes, for instance, have been at the center of global restitution debates, with institutions such as the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art facing pressure to return these cultural treasures to Nigeria (Sogbesan & Laotan-Brown, 2022), Successful repatriation of such artifacts will enable the African museums including the city of Benin to re -organize historical narratives and recover the ownership of their heritage, they play an important role in shaping cultural identity by preserving and showing people's tangible and abstract heritage. In Africa, where colonial history disrupted traditional socio-cultural systems, museums such as the National Museum Benin City worked as institutions to reconstruct cultural identity and reconstruction. Forced displacement of African artifacts for foreign museums has long been a source of cultural isolation, as many Africans have been denied access to their own heritage (Shehata & Abdel Wahab, 2023). Recently, the National Museum Benin City scored a major repatriation success in June 2025, securing the unconditional return of 119 Benin Bronzes from the Dutch State Collection handed over in Lagos on 21 June and now transferred to Benin City for conservation and display. (Government of the Netherlands, 2025). Therefore, most African museums face these moral and legal challenges in repatriation, including the need to address previous injustice and follow international rules (Shuhamchar, 2022). This repatriation successes can transform such museums as the National Museum Benin city into active sites of social-intelligent engagement from passive exhibition sites, promoting treatment and harmony among communities affected by historical injustice to active world class exhibition centers of rich indigenous heritage (Handler, 2021).



Plate 1: A Tale of Two Collections: While Benin City's National Museum(left) Safeguards Its Treasures, Many of the Empire's Finest Bronzes Remain Locked in Foreign Institutions(right).

The History and Significance of the National Museum Benin City:

The National Museum Benin City adopted as a case study for this research stands as one of the most prominent cultural institutions in Nigeria. The museum was established by the National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM) in 1973, The federal government of Nigeria

established the commission to replace the Federal Antiquities Department with Decree no. 77 of 1979. The decree was in 1990 replaced by the NCMM Act Chapter 242 of the Law of Nigeria. Thus, the then founded museum served as a store of artistic and historical artifacts of the Benin Kingdom, which is the dates to the 12th century (Emifoniye, 2023). These artifacts reflect the political, religious and social mobility of pre-colonial Benin, which provide valuable insight into their rule, spirituality and economy. The importance of the museum is beyond its collection of artifacts. It plays an important role in preserving the history of the Benin Empire, once a major power in West Africa, which is known for its highly organized political system and its refined artistry (Oriakhogba, 2022). The Benin Kingdom flourished between the 12th and 19th centuries, with the Oba (king) serving as the supreme authority. Art was deeply intertwined with governance, as bronze plaques and sculptures were commissioned to depict historical events, royal lineage, and religious practices.



Plate 2: National Museum of Benin City, Nigeria modern architecture with African motifs, surrounded by lush greenery.

However, this rich heritage suffered a severe blow during the British expedition of 1897, when colonial forces looted thousands of Benin Bronzes and other cultural treasures, many of which now reside in European museums such as the British Museum and the Ethnological Museum of Berlin (Jeffreys, 1951). The National Museum Benin City, therefore, plays a critical role in reclaiming and preserving the cultural identity of the Benin people. It serves as an institution for educating Nigerians and international visitors about the historical significance of the kingdom and its contributions to African civilization. The museum also plays a central role in the discourse on the restoration of looted African artifacts. As a demand for the withdrawal of the cultural heritage of theft, the museum has been designed as the primary patron of the rented

Benin Bronze, ensuring that they are reproduced in their cultural and historical context (Stahn, 2022). Despite its historical significance, the lack of modern protection features has made it difficult to maintain some delicate artifacts, while insufficient government support has obstructed efforts to expand its educational programs (Okonkwo, 2016). Museum management requires strategic partnership with international institutions to increase research and conservation initiative along with increased investment and conservation initiatives. Strengthening the role of the national museum Benin city in cultural protection will not only benefit Nigeria but will also contribute to the global praise of African heritage.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to examine curatorial and public perspectives on conservation, tourism, and repatriation at the National Museum, Benin City. By integrating ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, and a questionnaire survey, the design ensures depth of insight into institutional practices and breadth of understanding of public perceptions. A stratified random sampling technique ensures balanced representation in these groups. The data collection from the surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics while the qualitative insight by interview undergoes thematic analysis using NVivo analytical software. This triangulation method increases the depth and reliability of the study in the discovery of the role of the museum in cultural protection.

Sample Size

The study utilized a total sample size of 133 participants, which consists of 125 participants comprising of 100 locals and 25 museum visitors for the quantitative data collection, determined from 150 population, while only 8 museum staff and curator were interviewed for the qualitative data collection, as indicated in Table 1. The eight (8) interviewees were chosen to avoid thematic saturation (as pilot testing indicated no new themes emerged after seven interviews) consistent with saturation benchmarks in similar heritage studies (Guest et al., 2006), and 125 survey respondents were drawn from a 150-person pool based on the museums weekly visitor flow data and a pilot providing an $\pm 8\%$ margin of error at 95% confidence level.

Table 1: Distribution of Participants in Qualitative Interviews and Quantitative Surveys

Category	Qualitative Interviews	Quantitative Surveys	Population
Museum Curator and Staff	8	-	8
Local Residents	-	100	100
Museum Visitors	-	25	25
Total	8	125	133

Table 1 shows an overall total of 133 participants for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the study. The distribution indicates a balanced representation of public perspectives and expert insights on the museum which ensured for a robust mixed-methods analysis.

Data Collection Methods

The study used both a questionnaire surveys and interviews in the data collection. The structured questionnaire survey utilized a data collection from 125 respondents comprising of both local community members and tourists, Items in the survey probed public perspective and visitor awareness of the museum's conservation efforts, satisfaction with tourism services, and attitudes toward repatriation initiatives. The questionnaire was structured using the 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Aithal & Aithal, 2020). Conversely, a semi-structured interview guide comprising open-ended questions was created in order to gather qualitative data from eight (8) museum staff and curators were purposively selected for interviews to explore in detail the technical protocols, provenance research, and internal challenges associated with conserving and exhibiting the museum's artefacts. Furthermore, through ethnographic observation, the researcher conducted participant observation in the museum's conservation labs, assessing curators and staff "behind-the-scenes" meetings, and traditional bronze-casting workshops, with detailed field notes captured and coded in NVivo.

Data Integration and Rigor

Data collected through the quantitative method of questionnaire Survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, and cross-tabulations). While data obtained through the qualitative method of interviews were converted to transcript and analysis using the NVivo software. Combining both the thematic analysis of interview transcripts and field notes (via NVivo) with descriptive statistical findings enhances the reliability and richness of the insights.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, anonymity was guaranteed, and research procedures were approved by an institutional ethics committee.

Study Area

The study is conducted in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, with a particular focus on the National Museum Benin City. The museum is located at approximately 6.33° N latitude and 5.622° E longitude in the city center on King's Square close to the palace of the king Oba of Benin, making it accessible to both local communities and international visitors. The National Museum is architecturally significant for its strategic placement in the city center. Its building features a design that blends modern architectural elements with traditional Benin aesthetic principles, creating a space that is functional and culturally resonant. The museum's exterior design gives way to interior spaces carefully designed to facilitate the display and preservation of delicate artifacts, with controlled lighting and environmental conditions to protect its collections. The museum's prominence at the Ring Road roundabout suggests a structure designed for public engagement and visibility. It is historically significant as the center of the ancient Benin Kingdom, known for its rich cultural heritage and artistic masterpieces, including the renowned Benin Bronzes terracotta, and cast-iron pieces (Emifoniye, 2023). The National Museum Benin City was established to preserve and exhibit these historical artifacts, making it a relevant site for this research. The museum serves as an educational and cultural institution that attracts researchers, tourists, and students interested in African history and heritage preservation.

Map of National Museum Benin City Edo State, Nigeria

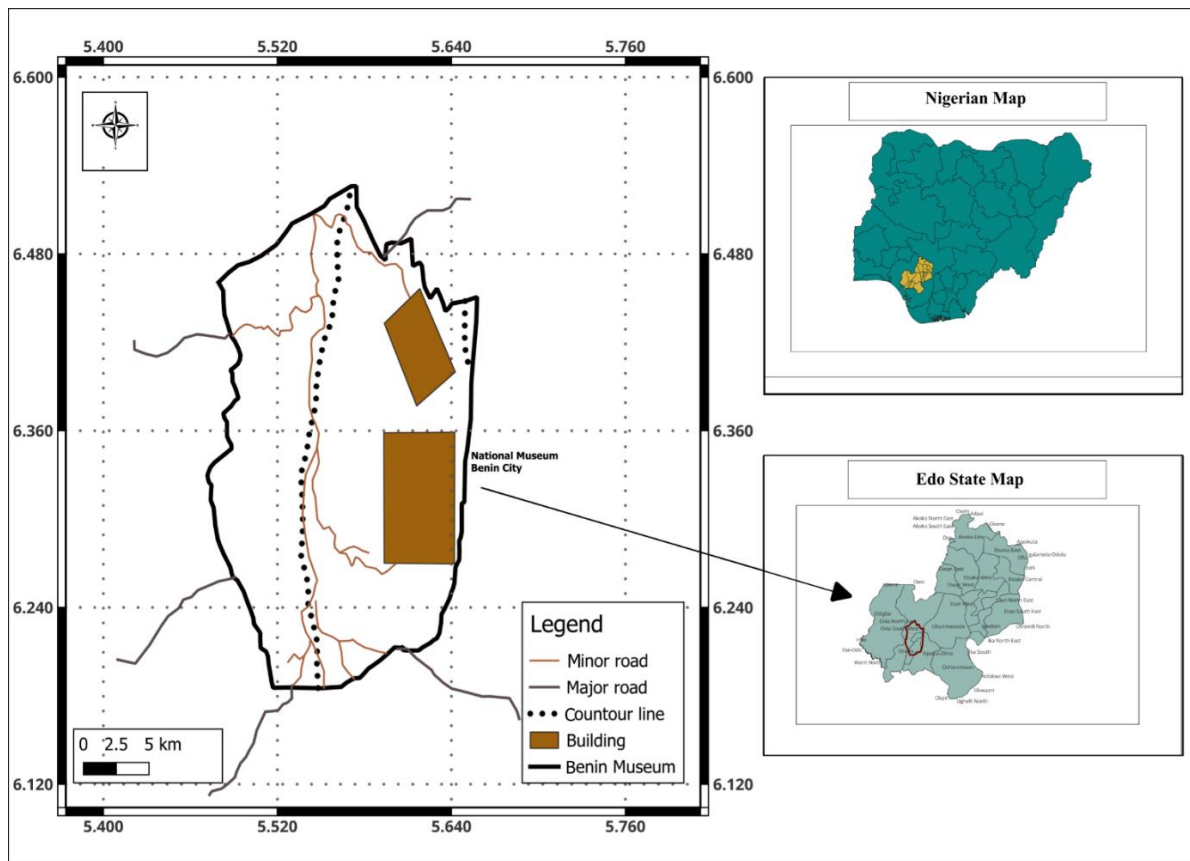


Figure 1: Map of National Museum Benin City

Source: Researcher's construct through QGIS mapping, 2025.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

This section presents analysis and interpretation of data collected from the triangulated analysis of qualitative interviews with museum professionals and quantitative public surveys. Consistent with the study's qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design, findings are structured around three key themes which includes "Institutional Practices" (*curatorial insights from 8 museum staff interviews and ethnographic observation*), "Public Perceptions" (*survey responses from 100 locals and 25 visitors*), and "Systemic Challenges" through (convergence of all data sources). The result is then analyzed through NVivo coded interview themes (on conservation protocols, community collaboration, repatriation hurdles) with descriptive statistics from the questionnaire survey Likert-scale (on visitor satisfaction and public awareness metrics) to provide insights in the museum's role in cultural preservation.

NVivo Thematic Analysis of Curatorial Perspectives: Institutional Practices

Findings from the thematic analysis of 8 semi-structured interviews with museum curator and staff, categorized into 7 core themes to reflect the institutional practices. The coding process followed Saldaña's (2021) iterative approach, with intercoder reliability verified at $\kappa=0.78$ (Kappa Coefficient) for coding consistency. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the staff members below to capture a comprehensive view of the museum's institutional practices. Interviews took place on-site and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and

were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Participants ranged in tenure from 3 to 25 years, representing both the museums curatorial and operational perspectives, gender balance was 5 male and 3 female. A purposive sampling strategy ensured that voices from making (e.g., Curator, Chief Heritage Officer, Administrative Head), to scholarly (Librarian, Education Head), and frontline service (Attendants, Secretary) were included, thereby illuminating a balanced insight into the day-to-day operations within the museum's institutional framework.

Table 2: Interviewed Museum Staff Positions and Responsibilities

Position	Responsibilities	Research Relevance
1. Museum Curator	Oversees museum collections and exhibition.	Central to conservation protocols
2. Chief Heritage Officer	Develops cultural preservation strategies	Drives community collaboration.
3. Education (Hod)	Handles all educational and research related tasks.	Critical for cultural transmission
4. Librarian	Manage archival collections and historical records	Essential for repatriation documentation
5. Museum Attendant 1	Frontline museum gallery supervision	Provides real-time visitor feedback
6. Museum Attendant 2	Frontline museum gallery supervision.	Provides real-time visitor feedback
7. Secretary	Manage communications organize museum documents	Maintains institutional memory through minutes.
8. Administrative Head	Oversees staffing, compliance and other administrative duties.	Administrative and staffing management

Table 2 showcases the eight (8) interviewed museum staff and their roles whose perspectives informed this study, thus linking each position's core duties to their specific contribution to the research objectives. The outlined positions ranging from curatorial oversight, heritage conservation to educational programming, administration, and visitor services, the table highlights how diverse professional perspectives shaped the study. The analytical table reflects not only managerial and curatorial viewpoints but also the practical, day-to-day experiences of operational staff, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of the National Museum Benin City's institutional realities in relation to the research objectives. Moreover, by capturing the voices of staff across hierarchical levels, the table emphasizes the interconnectedness of strategic decision-making and ground-level practice, illustrating how both formal policy directions and informal operational insights collectively influence the museum's capacity to preserve heritage, engage communities, and contribute to cultural tourism.

Therefore, by mapping these roles onto the thematic findings from the NVivo analysis in Table 3 below, thus we can trace how institutional responsibilities translate into the dominant curatorial narratives guiding the museum's practices and priorities. Across these analyzed themes, staff quotations outlined the dual imperatives of preserving the museum's artifact integrity and enhancing visitor engagement, while highlighting systemic challenges particularly funding shortfalls and skills gaps which must be addressed to advance repatriation goals and leverage new technologies.

Table 3: Theme Distribution of Institutional Practices

Theme	Frequency (%)	References	Dominant Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotations
Conservation Protocols	22%	41	Material integrity (38%), Hybrid methods (32%), Environmental controls (22%)	<i>"Preserving our heritage demands meticulous attention to every artifact's historical context and material integrity." (Chief Heritage Officer)</i>
Tourism Integration	20%	37	Visitor amenities (44%), Marketing campaigns (31%), Experience enhancement (25%)	<i>" By engaging with local artists and craftsmen, we promote cultural sustainability and economic empowerment within our community " (Education HOD)</i>
Funding Constraints	16%	30	Government underfunding (47%), Emergency conservation (29%), Revenue models (15%)	<i>" We are proud to announce the largest repatriation of our artifacts from the Netherlands, a triumph for cultural diplomacy and restitution in Nigeria" (Museum Curator)</i>
Community Collaboration	15%	28	Artisan partnerships (45%), Economic empowerment (32%), Knowledge transfer (23%)	<i>" Investing in our museum is investing in our cultural pride. We urge the government to prioritize funding for cultural institutions like ours to ensure the continuity of Benin heritage." (Admin Head)</i>
Training Deficits	14%	26	Skills gaps (55%), Staff development (33%), Modern techniques (12%)	<i>" We need support to implement digital archives that can preserve our artifacts digitally and make them accessible anywhere in the world" (Museum Attendant 1)</i>
Repatriation Efforts	9%	17	Legal frameworks (41%), Diplomatic channels (33%), Ownership documentation (18%)	<i>" Continuous learning opportunities are imperative for us to adapt to new methodologies in museum studies and cultural heritage preservation." (Librarian)</i>
Digital Innovation	4%	8	Virtual archives (52%), Digital documentation (31%), Preservation tech (17%)	<i>"More investment in tourism infrastructure and amenities around the museum could enhance the visitor experience" (Curator)</i>
Total	100%	187		

Table 3 presents a detailed breakdown of the seven (7) core themes, showing each theme's share of all coded references, the absolute number of references, key sub-themes, and an illustrative quotation of the National Museum Benin City's staff perspectives.

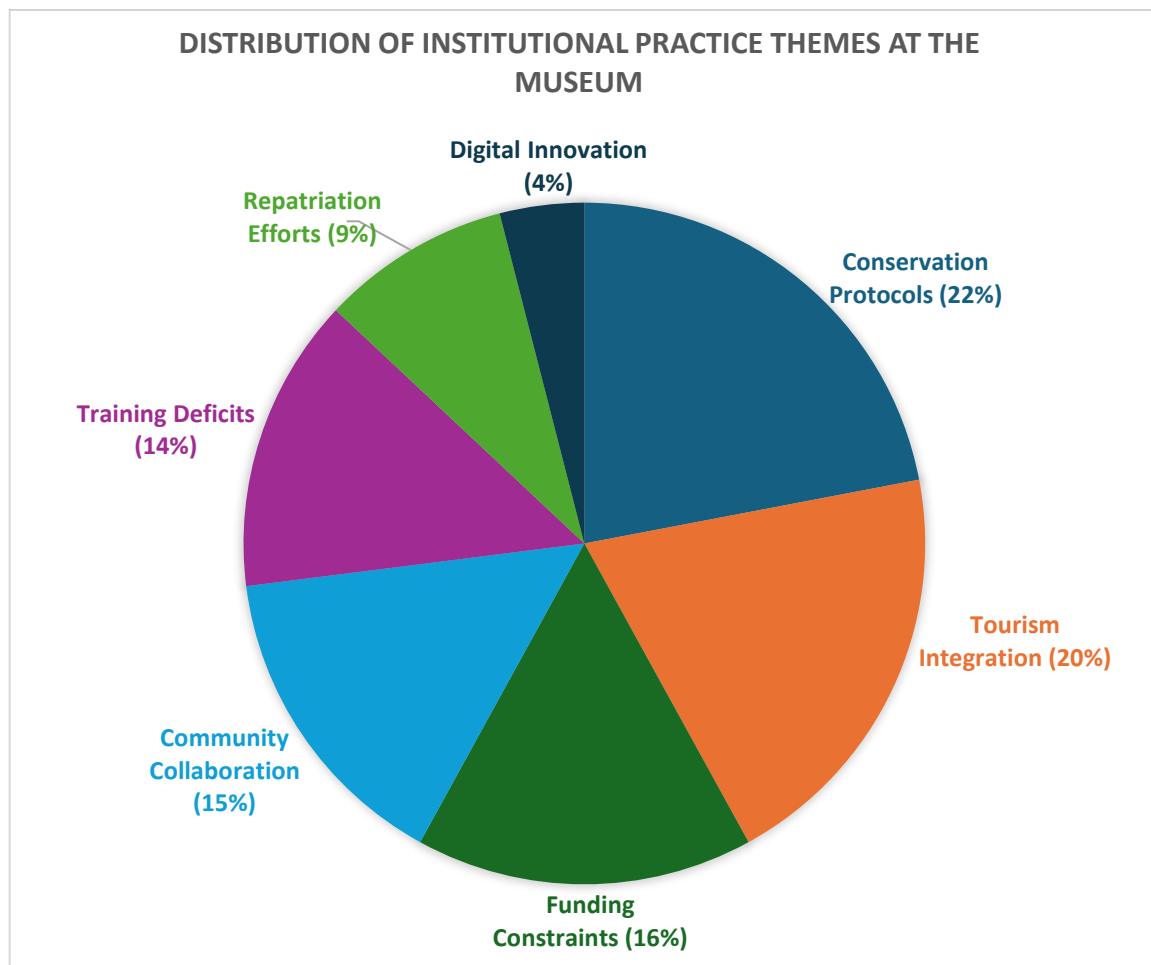


Figure 2: Pie Chart Distribution of Institutional Practice Themes

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of institutional practice themes identified through NVivo analysis, with Conservation Protocols accounting for 22 % of coded references, followed by Tourism Integration at 20 %, Funding Constraints at 16 %, Community Collaboration at 15 %, Training Deficits at 14 %, Repatriation Efforts at 9 %, and Digital Innovation at 4 %.

Identified Challenges from the Survey:

Across all eight positions, several pervasive challenges emerged that cut across departmental boundaries

Infrastructure Limitations: Every participant (8/8) reported inadequate storage facilities and unstable IT systems, constraining both physical conservation and digital integration. *Training Gaps:* Seven out of eight (7/8) staff members highlighted a lack of specialized skills particularly in digital archiving and modern museology, underscoring an urgent need for targeted professional development. *Tourism Development Needs:* All interviewees emphasized the imperative to upgrade visitor amenities (e.g., rest areas, multilingual signage), expand digital access through virtual tours and 3D archives, and forge marketing partnerships with bodies like the Edo Tourism Board. *Repatriation Progress:* Five of eight staff noted significant strides in restitution, recalling the largest return of Benin artifacts from the Netherlands and strengthened legal and diplomatic frameworks for future efforts.

By rigorously analyzing the National Museum Benin City's role in culture, tourism and repatriation within NVivo, we Captured various staff and curators' perspectives, highlighting relevant narratives on the core surveyed themes such as Meticulous artifact preservation ("Preserving our heritage demands meticulous attention..." - CHO), Tourism infrastructure needs ("More investment could enhance visitor experience" - Curator) as well as identified challenges within the museums institutional operations on areas such as critical funding gaps (16%) which threatens community partnerships (15%) and staff training (14%), while recent repatriation successes (9%) and digital aspirations (4%) also remained constrained by resources. Thus, the survey revealed that despite the museums established conservation protocols on paper, there exist pervasive funding shortfalls which result infrastructure limitations, digital integration and training gaps and thus weakens their effective implementation, undermining community partnerships and tourism development but the study also illuminates clear pathways for strategic improvement with recent progress in repatriation efforts by the national Museum Benin city.

Questionnaire Distribution and Response Rate

The distribution and retrieval of questionnaires are essential to determining the response rate and reliability of data. A total of 150 questionnaires were distributed, and 125 were retrieved, representing a high response rate of 83.3%.

Table 4: Questionnaire Distribution and Response Rate

Category	Number Distributed	Number Retrieved	Response Rate (%)
Museum Staff	120	100	83.3%
Tourists	30	25	83.3%
Total	150	125	83.3%

The *table 4* shows that the response rate of (83.3%) was high across all respondent categories, indicating effective data collection and participant engagement between local residents and museum visitors which highlights reliable survey outcomes representative of both community members and visitors' perspectives.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents:

The demographic information of respondents is crucial for understanding the composition of participants in this study. The variables examined include gender, age, educational qualification, and years of experience in cultural or museum-related activities.

Table 5: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Gender	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Male	69	55.2%
Female	56	44.8%
Total	125	100%

The *table 5* indicates that male respondents (55.2%) slightly outnumber female respondents (44.8%). This distribution reflects a balanced representation of perspectives across gender lines, allowing for diverse insights into museum-related issues.

Table 6: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Group (Years)	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
18 – 25	31	24.8%
26 – 35	42	33.6%
36 – 45	29	23.2%
46 and above	23	18.4%
Total	125	100%

The age distribution in *table 6* shows that a majority of respondents falls within the 26–35 age range (33.6%), followed by 18–25 (24.8%). The significant presence of younger participants suggests high interest in cultural heritage among younger demographics, which is essential for sustaining museum engagement in future generations.

Table 7: Educational Qualification of Respondents

Qualification	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Secondary Education	25	20.0%
ND/NCE	33	26.4%
HND/B.Sc	47	37.6%
M.Sc/Ph.D	20	16.0%
Total	125	100%

The findings in *table 7* indicate that the largest group of respondents holds an HND or bachelor's degree (37.6%), with significant representation from ND/NCE qualifications (26.4%). This educational distribution implies that the respondents possess a fair level of knowledge, which indicates a well-educated respondent pool.

What role does the National Museum Benin City play in preserving Nigeria's cultural heritage?

The first research question seeks to examine the contributions of the National Museum Benin City in the preservation of cultural heritage. Two research items were analyzed using a Likert scale:

Table 8: The Museum Safeguards Cultural Artifacts for Future Generations

Options	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	58	46.4%
Agree	47	37.6%
Disagree	13	10.4%
Strongly Disagree	7	5.6%
Total	125	100%

The data in *table 8* indicates that the majority (46.4% strongly agree, 37.6% agree) acknowledge the museum's role in safeguarding cultural artifacts. This confirms the institution's importance in protecting Nigeria's heritage for future generations. However, 16% of respondents express skepticism, suggesting that further improvements may be necessary.

Table 9: The Museum Promotes Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Education

Options	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	61	48.8%
Agree	44	35.2%
Disagree	11	8.8%
Strongly Disagree	9	7.2%
Total	125	100%

The findings from table 9 reveal that 85% (48.8% strongly agree, 35.2% agree) believe the museum effectively promotes indigenous knowledge and cultural education. This highlights the institution's role as a key educational center, reinforcing the significance of museums in cultural preservation.

What are the major challenges facing the museum in terms of conservation, funding, and public engagement?

This section examines the difficulties encountered by the National Museum Benin City in preserving Nigeria's cultural heritage. Two research items were analyzed using a Likert scale.

Table 10: Inadequate Funding Hinders the Museum's Operations

Options	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	66	52.8%
Agree	35	28.0%
Disagree	15	12.0%
Strongly Disagree	9	7.2%
Total	125	100%

The *table 10* indicates that a majority of respondents (52.8% strongly agree, 28.0% agree) recognize inadequate funding as a major challenge to the museum's operations. This highlights the need for increased financial support from the government and private sector. However, 19.2% of respondents disagree, possibly suggesting that other issues are equally critical.

Table 11: Lack of Public Awareness and Engagement Limits Museum Visits

Options	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	52	41.6%
Agree	43	34.4%
Disagree	19	15.2%
Strongly Disagree	11	8.8%
Total	125	100%

The data in *table 11* reveals that 76% of respondents (41.6% strongly agree, 34.4% agree) believe that public awareness and engagement remain significant barriers to increased museum visits. This suggests that more public outreach programs and digital engagement strategies are needed to attract more visitors.

How has the museum contributed to cultural awareness, education, and tourism in Nigeria?

This section assesses the impact of the museum on cultural awareness, education, and tourism development.

Table 12: The Museum Plays a Significant Role in Cultural Awareness and Education

Options	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	68	54.4%
Agree	35	28.0%
Disagree	13	10.4%
Strongly Disagree	9	7.2%
Total	125	100%

Findings from *table 12* show that a majority of respondents (54.4% strongly agree, 28.0% agree) believe that the museum plays a vital role in promoting cultural awareness and education. The few who disagree (17.6%) may feel that the museum's educational efforts are insufficient or need improvement.

Table 13: The Museum Serves as a Tourist Attraction that Contributes to Economic Growth

Options	Frequency (N=125)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	63	50.4%
Agree	41	32.8%
Disagree	12	9.6%
Strongly Disagree	9	7.2%
Total	125	100%

The table shows that 50.4% of respondents strongly agree and 32.8% agree that the museum contributes to tourism and economic growth. This underscores its role as an important cultural and economic institution. However, 16.9% of respondents disagree, indicating that more efforts might be needed to fully realize its economic potential.

Discussion

The findings from the study synthesize the triangulated findings from qualitative interviews with museum professionals and quantitative public surveys, structured around the three major areas which include Institutional Practices and Public Perceptions. The analysis thus highlighted the National Museum Benin City's significant role in cultural heritage preservation whilst also outlining critical constraints hindering its full potential especially for tourism.

Institutional Practices: Curatorial Insights and Operational Realities:

The NVivo analysis of staff interviews provides a granular view of the national Museum Benin city's operational priorities and challenges. The dominance of Conservation Protocols (22%) emphasized the museum's commitment to preserving its artifacts in their historical context (Bourdieu, 1986). The Chief Heritage Officer's in his interview asserts that "Preserving the Benin museum heritage demands meticulous attention to every artifact's original historical context and material integrity" encapsulated this core mission on conservation. Other museum staff also detailed the use of hybrid conservation methods and strict environmental controls,

reflecting adherence to professional standards despite constraints. Conversely, Tourism Integration (20%) and Community Collaboration (15%) were identified as strategic focuses, aligning with literature on museums' dual role in cultural sustainability and economic empowerment (Fogelman, 2008). Consequently, the museum's Education Head highlighted the dual benefit of this approach citing that "by engaging with local artists and craftsmen, we promote cultural sustainability through tourism and creating economic empowerment within our community." reflecting strategies recommended for inclusive museum practices (Areo, 2014). Furthermore, many museum staff consistently advocated enhanced visitor amenities and marketing partnerships, with the Curator noting that "More investment in tourism infrastructure and amenities around the museum could enhance the visitor experience." This emphasis aligns with the museum's goal of being both a cultural custodian and an economic catalyst.

However, these aspirations are heavily constrained by pervasive Funding Constraints which racked up (16%) and Training Deficits (14%) of the survey discourse, echoing the broader literature on the financial limitations and skills gaps faced by museums in developing regions. (Abungu, 2005). Underfunding directly undermines the museum's capacity to accumulate and deploy 'objectified' cultural capital exhibitions and published catalogues that Bourdieu (1986) identifies as essential for transmitting heritage knowledge to the public. These constraints were highlighted by the museum's Administrative Head who ascertained that funding is instrumental as a matter of cultural survival as "Investing in the museum is investing in the cultural pride of the people thus urged the government to prioritize investing in the museum's critical needs to ensure the continuity of Benin heritage." reinforcing the need for governmental support (Onuoha, 2019). Most staff uniformly cited inadequate infrastructure (in storage, IT) and critical skills gaps, particularly in digital archiving and documentation. Training deficits erode the museum's 'embodied' cultural capital, since curators and educators lack opportunities to internalize and disseminate new museological practices (Hyyppä, 2010), thereby limiting visitors' acquisition of symbolic and intellectual resources. The Librarian emphasized the need for "Continuous learning opportunities highlighting the need towards adapting to new museological methodologies," echoing Todino and Campitiello's (2025) finding that ongoing professional development is critical for updating curatorial practices in line with global best-practices. Nevertheless, the Museum Attendant 1 stressed the need for support to implement "digital archives that can preserve the museum's artifacts digitally." Which is consistent with (Ross, 2012) argument that robust digital archiving frameworks not only safeguard collections but also expand access through virtual exhibitions. These deficits directly impact lower-priority areas like Digital Innovation (4%) and Repatriation Efforts (9%), despite recent successes celebrated by the Curator "a triumph for cultural diplomacy", reflecting Lundén's (2016) observation that limited technological capacity often constrains repatriation initiatives by hindering provenance research and stakeholder communication.

Public Perceptions: Validation and Divergence:

In addition to the in-depth qualitative interviews, the survey conducted questionnaire results aimed to assessing public perception of the museum's cultural preservation roles largely validated the museum's core cultural mission but highlighted significant public concerns about tourism attraction and cultural awareness. Thus, on the topic of preservation and education roles, the surveyed tourists and residents strongly affirmed that the museum's primary functions is in cultural awareness and conservation. This was indicated by an overwhelming

84% (46.4% Strongly Agree + 37.6% Agree) respondents agreeing that the museum's role is to educate and safeguards artifacts for future generations (Table 8), This mirrors Todino and Campitiello's (2025) observation that visitor endorsement of museum educational roles is critical for institutional legitimacy. Similarly, 84% (48.8% Strongly Agree + 35.2% Agree) agree it promotes indigenous knowledge and cultural education (Table 9), aligning with UNESCO's (2021) findings on museums as key transmitters of intangible heritage. This aligns with the institutional focus on conservation and education revealed in the interviews. Furthermore, 82.4% (54.4% Strongly Agree + 28.0% Agree) believe the museum plays a significant role in cultural awareness and education (Table 12), reinforcing its perceived value as an educational institution, which according to Falk and Dierking (2013), such high public endorsement correlates with increased repeat visitation and community advocacy.

On its recognition as a tourist asset with economic potential, the public acknowledges the museum's tourism role, with 83.2% (50.4% Strongly Agree + 32.8% Agree) agreeing it contributes to economic growth (Table 13). This supports the staff's high prioritization of Tourism Integration, as highlighted by the study from Oluwole's (2019) who stressed that Nigerian museums could drive local tourism revenue when backed by effective promotional strategies, even though current marketing remains insufficient.

Sharp Critique was made in the areas of the museums funding and awareness gaps as public perception strongly echoes staff concerns about funding constraints. A striking 80.8% (52.8% Strongly Agree + 28.0% Agree) agrees that inadequate funding hinders operations (Table 10), directly validating the staff's narrative, as affirmed in Abungu (2005) research on chronic under-resourcing of African museums, particularly in conservation facilities and staffing. Similarly, 76% (41.6% Strongly Agree + 34.4% Agree) identify Lack of Public Awareness and Engagement as a major barrier to tourist visits (Table 11). This echoes Fogelman's (2008) comparative study as he noted that low visitor engagement across West African museums often stems from poor outreach and limited educational programming. The 16% expressing skepticism about artifact safeguarding and 17.6% disagreeing about the educational role (Tables 8 & 12) further outline the impact of these limitations on public confidence. Which aligns with Emifoniye (2023) observation that infrastructural deficits and insufficient digital access dilute visitors' trust in the museum's ability to protect and interpret its collections.

Ultimately, the convergence of qualitative and quantitative data paints a clear picture of the National Museum Benin City's systemic challenges rooted in chronic under-resourcing. With funding as the overarching bottleneck in the research outcome as both the staff interviews (16% frequency, universal infrastructure complaints) and public surveys (80.8% agreement on hindrance) pinpointed inadequate funding as the paramount issue sustained the operational activities of the museum, As supported by Onuoha (2019) study, addressing this funding gap is essential to unlock the full potential of museums as both cultural stewards and economic catalysts.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Based on the findings, it is evident that the National Museum Benin City plays a vital role in safeguarding Nigeria's cultural heritage. The study outcome revealed a museum that is institutionally committed to rigorous cultural conservation, community engagement, and improving its tourism value, a commitment broadly recognized both the surveys of the museum staff, and public. However, the effectiveness of these endeavors is critically hampered by systemic underfunding, leading to infrastructure decay, skills shortages, and limited capacity for innovation and cultural awareness. This scarcity creates a cycle where core mandates consume limited resources, hindering the very initiatives (digital access, enhanced tourism amenities, robust marketing) that could generate greater public engagement, visitation, and potentially, alternative revenue streams. Addressing these challenges requires collaborative efforts from the government, private institutions, and international cultural organizations, thus a well-defined stakeholder partnerships and financing frameworks must be established, and operational policies strengthened.

Recommendations

To guide evidence-based improvements based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Stakeholder Network Mapping:** Analyze governance structures among National Commission for Museum and Monuments (NCMM), Edo State government agencies, the Oba's Palace, local guilds, and UNESCO to identify leverage points for resource mobilization.
- **PPP Model Evaluation:** Compare heritage-focused public-private partnerships such as heritage bonds and tourism levies should be established to assess revenue stability, socio-economic impact, and replicability.
- **Diaspora Engagement Studies:** Survey Nigerian diaspora communities to evaluate their willingness to invest in low-interest heritage bonds and preferred bond structures.
- **Repatriation Framework Analysis:** Review memoranda of understanding with international museums to track timelines, conservation outcomes, and research collaborations.
- **Capacity-Building Impact:** Conduct longitudinal studies on the effect of UNESCO/ICOM training workshops on staff performance, exhibit quality, and visitor satisfaction.
- **Infrastructure-Visitor Experience Audit:** Develop a rapid-audit tool linking specific infrastructure upgrades to changes in visitor flow, dwell time, and satisfaction.
- **Community Perception Research:** Undertake ethnographic studies to capture local stakeholders' views on co-governance models, benefit-sharing, and museum initiatives.
- **Policy Revision Impact Analysis:** There is need to examine how updates to cultural-heritage policies influence sponsorship transparency, ease of PPP agreements, and alignment with international ethics.

Together, these research directions will deepen understanding of partnership dynamics, financing efficacy, digital innovation, and community involvement paving the way for sustainable heritage conservation and tourism development at the National Museum Benin City and beyond.

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