

The Role of Government Policies in Preservation of Cultural Heritage in Calabar Metropolis of Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the role of government policies in the preservation of cultural heritage in Calabar. The study specifically identified the cultural heritage assets targeted by government preservation initiatives and assessed the role of government policies in safeguarding cultural heritage within the study area. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. Data were obtained from both primary and secondary sources through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions, and documentary materials. The study population comprised government tourism officials, cultural stakeholders, and community council elders, from which a sample size of 86 respondents was selected using purposive and cluster sampling techniques. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Findings revealed that traditional festivals (16.3%), traditional dances (11.6%), indigenous foods and dressing (10.5% respectively) were the most targeted cultural assets under government preservation initiatives, while oral traditions, sacred sites, and communal spaces received comparatively lower attention. The study further showed that government policies play significant roles through legislation against the destruction of cultural sites (15.1%), provision of funds for cultural activities (14.0%), and support for traditional festivals (12.8%). Correlation analysis indicated a strong positive relationship between government-targeted cultural assets and policy roles in heritage preservation ($R = 0.853$; $p < 0.001$). The study concludes that although government policies contribute significantly to cultural preservation and tourism development, preservation efforts remain uneven and insufficiently inclusive. The study therefore recommends stronger community participation, improved funding, balanced preservation strategies, and enhanced policy implementation for sustainable cultural heritage management.

Keywords: cultural heritage, preservation, government policies, Calabar metropolis, Cross River State

Introduction

Cultural heritage preservation has emerged as a critical area of concern globally, particularly as nations seek to safeguard their historical and cultural assets from the pressures of modernization, urban expansion, and globalization. Governments around the world have enacted policies to protect tangible and intangible heritage, guided largely by frameworks such as the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. These instruments emphasize the importance of safeguarding monuments, sites, oral traditions, and cultural practices that define the identity of communities. However, while these conventions have provided international guidelines, the implementation of heritage preservation policies at the national level often reflects unique political, economic, and socio-cultural dynamics (Logan, 2019).

Developed country like U.S in recent years has shifted its cultural policy toward inclusivity and collaboration. Federal and state agencies increasingly engage Native American tribes, African American

communities, and immigrant groups in heritage decision-making processes (National Park Service, 2023). The emphasis has expanded beyond tangible monuments to include cultural landscapes, oral histories, and community narratives, aligning with global trends under UNESCO conventions. Scholars have argued that, sustainable preservation of cultural heritage in Africa requires governments to adopt a more integrated approach that links cultural heritage with tourism, education, environmental conservation, and local livelihoods (Ndoro & Wijesuriya, 2022).

Within this national framework, Cross River State is one of Nigeria's richest cultural regions, boasting the Calabar Museum, colonial-era architecture, traditional crafts, and internationally recognized cultural festivals such as the Calabar Carnival. The state government, often in partnership with the NCMM, has pursued initiatives to rehabilitate heritage institutions and promote cultural festivals as vehicles for tourism and economic development (Cross River Government, 2024).

However, challenges remain. The Calabar Museum, despite its historical importance, has long suffered neglect, poor infrastructure, and inadequate funding (Eja, 2021). Similarly, while cultural festivals have boosted tourism, their increasing commercialization raises concerns about balancing authenticity with economic gains. Addressing these issues requires stronger policy coordination, adequate investment, capacity building, and sustained community engagement. Cross River State is endowed with diverse cultural heritage, including museums, colonial architecture, and festivals such as the Calabar Carnival.

Despite existing policies, major challenges persist. Heritage institutions remain underfunded, infrastructure for conservation is weak, and intangible heritage like indigenous languages and traditional practices receives limited attention compared to festivals. The growing commercialization of cultural events threatens authenticity, while poor documentation and limited professional expertise undermine preservation. Furthermore, community participation in heritage management remains inadequate. Therefore, the study seeks to examine the role of government policies in preservation of cultural heritage in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State, Nigeria

Objectives of the study

1. Identify the cultural heritage assets and government preservation initiatives in the study area.
2. Examine the role of government policies in the preservation of cultural heritage in the study area.

Literature review

Specific cultural assets targeted by government preservation initiatives.

Cultural heritage in Nigeria represents one of the most diverse and complex repositories of traditions, values, and material expressions in Africa. In her work *Nigerian Cultural Heritage: Preservation, Challenges and Prospects*, Onyima (2016) investigates the endangered status of both tangible and intangible heritages across the country. Drawing from historical, anthropological, and archaeological perspectives, she adopts a functionalist lens to examine how Nigerian cultural heritage embodies the lived realities and social practices of different communities. Her study emphasizes that, despite Nigeria's rich endowment, cultural heritage remains under severe threat from internal and external pressures. The study foregrounds Nigeria's multi-ethnic composition as a source of immense cultural wealth. Oral traditions, festivals, artefacts, indigenous belief systems, architecture, and artistic works constitute significant elements of national heritage.

A study by Kiarie (2024) examines how globalization simultaneously presents opportunities and challenges for safeguarding cultural heritage. The study highlights the dynamic tension between cultural preservation and global economic, social, and political transformations. The research adopts a desk study methodology, relying on secondary data gathered from published works, reports, and statistics. This methodological choice allows for a broad synthesis of existing knowledge, situating the discussion within the wider scholarly discourse on heritage and globalization. While such an approach is cost-effective and useful in identifying theoretical trends, it also introduces certain limitations, as it does not provide empirical, on-the-ground evidence.

Banda et al. (2024) explore the significance of community involvement in sustaining cultural heritage. The study employs a qualitative, participatory approach to investigate how community members contribute to the preservation of the Khulubvi Traditional Temple, a sacred site in Malawi that faces

multifaceted challenges. The authors frame their study within the broader discourse of community-based cultural heritage management. By emphasizing participatory approaches, the research challenges the dominance of top-down heritage governance models that often overlook local agency. Perera (2024) examines how tangible and intangible forms of heritage such as indigenous knowledge, rituals, architecture, arts, and social systems can be safeguarded using modern approaches, particularly digital technologies. By highlighting the role of libraries, archives, museums, and government institutions, the study situates heritage preservation at the intersection of culture, identity, and sustainable development.

The role of government policies in safeguarding cultural heritage

Cultural heritage and archaeological sites are increasingly vulnerable in war-affected regions, where armed conflict and political instability undermine governance and cultural preservation. Iraq and Syria exemplify this crisis, having suffered severe destruction of heritage sites during the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. Scholars emphasize that the protection of cultural property is both a legal responsibility of governments and a central concern for the international community (Forrest, 2010; Francioni & Lenzerini, 2008).

Again, Lostal (2017) emphasizes that international law provides important precedents for prosecuting heritage destruction as war crimes, as seen in the International Criminal Court's judgment on the Timbuktu case in Mali. This suggests potential avenues for accountability in Iraq and Syria. A strength of the existing literature lies in its legal grounding and comparative approach. By examining both Iraq and Syria, scholars reveal shared challenges and provide a broader understanding of how conflict erodes heritage protection. The literature also situates cultural heritage within the framework of humanitarian obligations and international cooperation (Stone, 2015; Al-Quntar & Hanson, 2016). Ahmad (2022) specifically investigates the legal role of governments in protecting cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria, raising critical questions about state responsibility and institutional capacity.

Syamsuddin et al. (2022) also note that local communities provide essential support, helping to mitigate neglect by authorities. This illustrates the importance of community-government partnerships. From an economic perspective, heritage conservation has untapped potential to drive local development through cultural tourism. Rahman (2021) highlights how well-preserved sites can increase regional own-source revenue (PAD). For North Aceh, revitalizing the Malikussaleh tomb complex could attract religious and historical tourism, yet current neglect reduces its financial and cultural impact (Syamsuddin et al., 2022).

Concept of policy framework for cultural presentation

The concept of policy frameworks for cultural preservation does not have a single founder but rather evolved through the collective efforts of international organizations, governments, and scholars. The most influential role was played by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), which has been at the forefront of global cultural preservation since its establishment in 1945. A landmark moment came in 1972 when UNESCO introduced the World Heritage Convention, which formally emphasized safeguarding both tangible and intangible cultural heritage through structured policy frameworks. This idea gained further momentum with the 1987 Brundtland Report on sustainable development, which, although not directly focused on culture, highlighted the need for development that meets the needs of the present without compromising future generations. This broadened the foundation for linking cultural protection with sustainability. Later, UNESCO deepened the discussion through its 1999 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which stressed the need to protect cultural identity in the face of globalization, and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which solidified global commitment to cultural preservation.

Materials and methods

This study adopted a mixed-methods design. This study was carried out in Cross River State, located in the southeastern part of Nigeria. The state is sharing boundaries with Benue State to the north, Ebonyi and Abia States to the west, Akwa Ibom State to the southwest, and the Republic of Cameroon to the east, while

the Atlantic Ocean is forming its southern boundary. Cross River State is covering a landmass of about 21,787 square kilometers and is consisting of 18 Local Government Areas, with Calabar serving as the state capital. Data were source from both primary and secondary to achieve the aim of the study. The population of this study comprised government officials, cultural stakeholders, and residents of Calabar Metropolis who were involved in cultural heritage preservation. The sample size comprised one-half of the individual population. The table 1, showed the distribution of the population and the sample size used for the study.

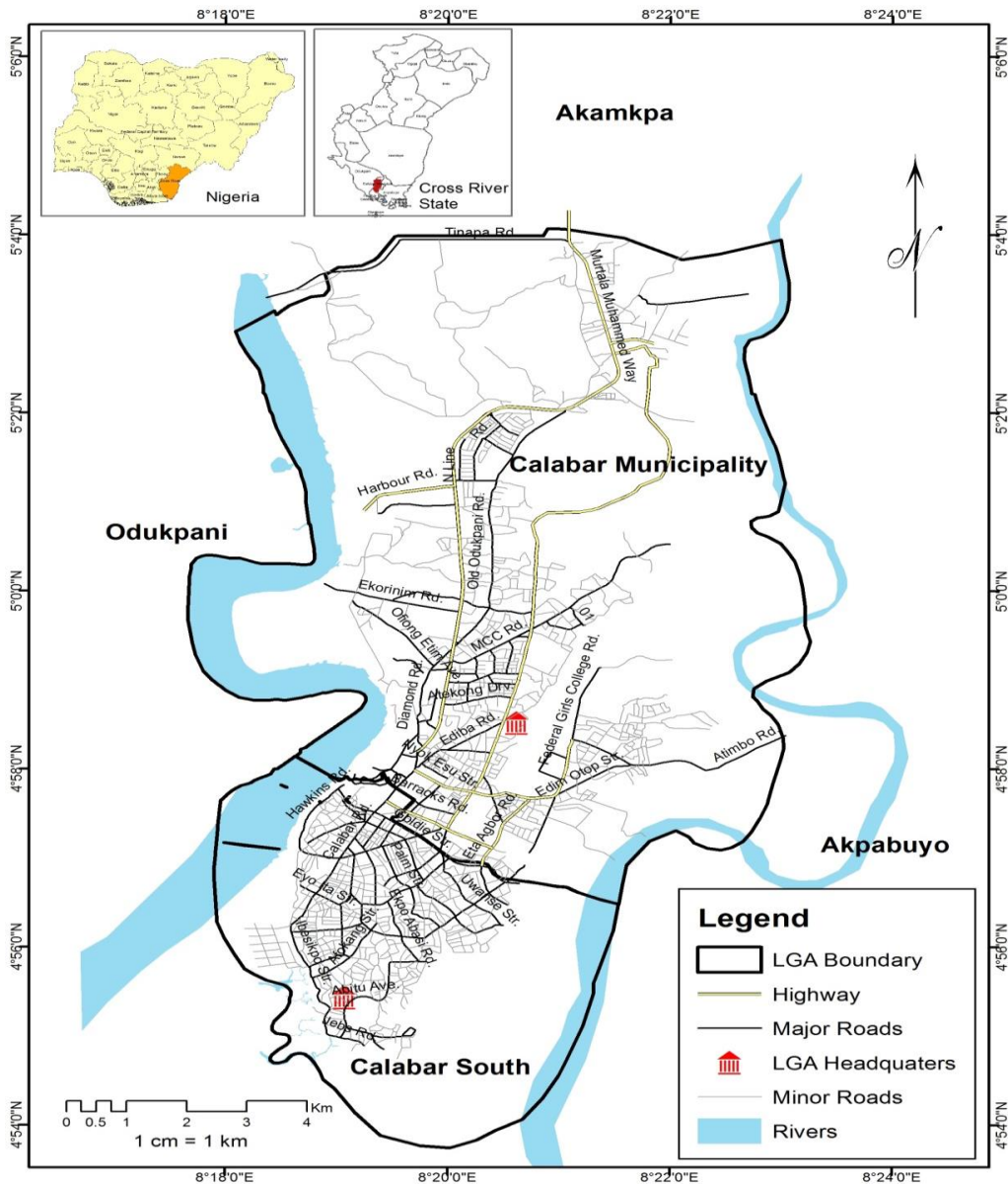


FIG.1: Calabar Metropolis

Source: Cross River Geographic Information Agency, (2026).

TABLE 1: Population and sample size

S/N	Stakeholders	Population sample	Sample size	Returned
1	Government Tourism officials			
	Carnival commission	32	16	16
	Tourism Bureau	42	21	20
	Ministry of Tourism, Art and Culture	28	14	14
	Total	102	51	50
2	Community councils			
	Obong of Calabar palace	25	11	11
	Ndedem of the quo nation	15	8	8
	Murimunene of the Efut nation	15	8	8
	Paramount ruler of Calabar South	15	8	8
	Total	70	35	25
	Grand Total	172	86	85

A mixed sampling technique was adopted for this study, combining purposive and cluster sampling methods. Questionnaire were administered to staff in government agencies and community council elders using the purposive sampling technique. 2–4 key informants and 4 focus groups (with 6–10 participants each) from various community palaces. A total of 172 individuals, comprising staff from government agencies and community council elders, constituted the study population. Data collected were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical tools.

Result and discussion

The cultural assets targeted by government preservation initiatives, as presented in Table 2, reflect the areas where public efforts are most visible within the study area. Traditional festivals recorded the highest frequency at 16.30 percent, indicating that government attention is largely directed toward cultural elements that are highly visible and capable of attracting public participation and tourism. This is followed by traditional dances at 11.60 percent, while indigenous foods and cooking styles and traditional dressing each accounted for 10.50 percent. This trend suggests that government preservation efforts prioritize expressive and lifestyle-oriented cultural assets that are often showcased during festivals, cultural exhibitions, and tourism-related events. Cultural music and instruments also received moderate attention at 9.30 percent, further reinforcing the emphasis on performative cultural expressions. Historical buildings and local crafts and handicrafts each recorded 8.10 percent, indicating moderate levels of preservation focus. Sacred forests and shrines accounted for 7.00 percent, while ancient monuments and oral traditions and storytelling each recorded 5.80 percent. These lower values suggest limited government engagement

with culturally sensitive, sacred, or less commercialized heritage resources, which may be affected by funding limitations, policy gaps, or competing land-use interests.

Community meeting places such as village squares recorded the lowest level of attention at 4.70 percent, while other cultural assets accounted for 1.17 percent. Overall, the findings indicate that government preservation initiatives tend to concentrate on highly visible and marketable cultural assets, with comparatively less emphasis on communal spaces and intangible heritage. This highlights the need for a more balanced and inclusive preservation strategy that adequately supports both tangible and intangible cultural heritage for sustainable cultural development.

TABLE 2: Cultural assets targeted by government preservation initiatives

s/n	Cultural assets targeted by government preservation initiatives	Frequency	Percentage
1	Traditional festivals	14	16.30
2	Sacred forests/shrines	6	7.00
3	Historical buildings	7	8.10
4	Ancient monuments	5	5.80
5	Traditional dances	10	11.60
6	Local crafts/handicrafts	7	8.10
7	Indigenous foods and cooking styles	9	10.50
8	Cultural music and instruments	8	9.30
9	Oral traditions and storytelling	5	5.80
10	Traditional dressing	9	10.50
11	Community meeting places (e.g., village square)	4	4.70
12	Others (please specify)	1	1.17
	Total	85	100

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2026

Role of government policies in preserving cultural heritage

The role of government policies in preserving cultural heritage, as shown in Table 3, highlights the key areas through which public authorities contribute to cultural sustainability. The creation of laws against the destruction of cultural sites recorded the highest proportion at 15.10 percent, indicating that legal frameworks are perceived as the most significant policy instrument for protecting cultural heritage. Providing funds for cultural activities followed closely at 14.00 percent, reflecting the importance of financial support in sustaining cultural practices and heritage-related programmes. Supporting traditional festivals also accounted for a substantial share at 12.80 percent, suggesting that government policies often prioritize cultural activities with high public visibility and tourism potential. Encouraging tourism recorded 10.60 percent, further underscoring the linkage between cultural preservation and tourism development. Protecting historical buildings accounted for 9.30 percent, while training community members and promoting cultural education each recorded 8.10 percent. These figures suggest moderate government engagement in capacity building and educational initiatives aimed at sustaining cultural heritage. Supporting local craftsmen accounted for 7.00 percent, indicating some level of policy attention to indigenous skills and creative industries.

Preserving cultural records recorded 5.80 percent, while partnering with community leaders accounted for 4.70 percent, pointing to relatively limited emphasis on documentation and collaborative governance. Monitoring cultural projects and other roles recorded the lowest proportions at 2.30 percent and 1.20 percent respectively. However, the table indicates that government policies play an active but uneven role in cultural preservation, with greater emphasis on legislation, funding, and festival support, and less attention given to monitoring, documentation, and community partnership.

TABLE 3: Role of government policies in preserving cultural heritage

s/n	Role of Government Policies in Preserving Cultural Heritage	Frequency	Percentage
1	Providing funds for cultural activities	12	14.00
2	Supporting traditional festivals	11	12.80
3	Training community members	7	8.10
4	Creating laws against destruction of cultural sites	13	15.10
5	Encouraging tourism	9	10.60
6	Supporting local craftsmen	6	7.00
7	Preserving cultural records	5	5.80
8	Protecting historical buildings	8	9.30
9	Promoting cultural education	7	8.10
10	Partnering with community leaders	4	4.70
11	Monitoring cultural projects	2	2.30
12	Others (please specify)	1	1.20
	Total	85	100

Source: Researcher's Fieldwork, 2026

A careful examination of the data presented in Table 4 shows a strong positive correlation between the two variables, indicating that government-targeted cultural assets are closely linked to the roles played by government policies in cultural heritage preservation, with a correlation coefficient of ($R=0.853$; $P < 0.001$). The correlation analysis indicates a statistically significant and positive linear relationship between cultural assets targeted by government preservation initiatives and the role of government policies in preserving cultural heritage in the study area. This suggests that government policies are more active and impactful where specific cultural assets are clearly identified and prioritized for preservation.

TABLE 4

Correlations

		Cultural assets targeted by government	Role of government policies
Cultural assets	Pearson Correlation	1	.853**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	4873.000	752.000

targeted by government	Covariance	542.000	707.775
	N	11	11
Role of government policies	Pearson Correlation	.853**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	Sum of Squares and Cross-products	4852.000	6223.00
	Covariance	608.875	764.650
	N	11	11

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insights into the role, effectiveness, and challenges of government policies in the preservation of cultural heritage. Analysis of the cultural assets targeted by government preservation initiatives indicates a clear preference for highly visible and performative cultural elements, such as traditional festivals and dances, as well as indigenous foods and dressing. These assets are often prioritized because they are easily showcased, attract public participation, and serve as platforms for tourism promotion and economic gain. This focus aligns with existing literature that notes governments tend to support heritage that can generate immediate social and economic returns while enhancing national or regional identity (Richards, 2007; Throsby, 2010). Conversely, intangible heritage, sacred sites, oral traditions, and communal spaces, such as village squares, receive comparatively less attention. Such forms of heritage, deeply embedded in local belief systems and social practices, often require sensitive handling, extensive consultation, and consistent funding, making them less compatible with top-down preservation models (UNESCO, 2003; Chirikure & Pwiti, 2008).

The study also highlights the contributions of government policies to cultural preservation. Government interventions are perceived to enhance cultural festivals, increase public awareness of cultural values, and stimulate tourism activities. These outcomes illustrate the government's role in promoting cultural visibility and facilitating opportunities for intergenerational transmission of traditions. Additionally, government support contributes to the protection and renovation of cultural sites, promotion of traditional crafts, and incorporation of cultural education initiatives within local schools. These efforts are consistent with literature emphasizing that government policies can reinforce cultural identity, promote social cohesion, and integrate heritage into broader development agendas (Throsby, 2010; UNESCO, 2003). However, contributions to employment opportunities, community engagement, and stronger relationships between government and local stakeholders are perceived as limited. This suggests that while policies succeed in enhancing cultural visibility, their socio-economic and community-centered impacts are still constrained, reflecting a need for more inclusive approaches that balance heritage preservation with livelihood and participatory outcomes (Richards, 2018).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that government policies play a significant but uneven role in the preservation of cultural heritage in Calabar Metropolis, Cross River State. Findings indicate that government interventions predominantly target highly visible and performative cultural assets, such as traditional festivals, dances, indigenous foods, and cultural music. These assets are prioritized due to their ability to attract public participation, enhance tourism, and generate economic returns. Conversely, intangible heritage, sacred sites, oral traditions, and communal spaces receive comparatively limited attention, reflecting a policy focus on marketable cultural expressions rather than a comprehensive approach to heritage preservation.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the effectiveness of government policies in preserving cultural heritage in Calabar Metropolis:

1. The government should empower ministry culture and local community to safeguard and the available cultural assets for preservation of cultural heritage.
2. Government policies should actively involve local communities, traditional leaders, and cultural custodians in decision-making and implementation processes. Community participation ensures ownership, strengthens compliance, and facilitates the sustainable preservation of both tangible and intangible heritage, including oral traditions, sacred sites, and communal spaces.

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