

TECH MEETS TRADITION: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE PROTECTION OF AFRICAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

Assoc. Prof. Obiora Anichebe
Department of Philosophy
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
obiora.anichebe@unn.edu.ng; 08037509221

Moses Terwase Torhemen
Department of Philosophy
Benue State University, Makurdi
raphmoses179@gmail.com, Mosestorhemen@bsun.edu.ng
+234869336442/08077972604

Abstract

The confluence of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and African cultural heritage is both of great promise and pressing concern. With the development of AI technologies, they offer immense tools for digitizing, documenting, and disseminating Africa's rich cultural productions, oral performances, indigenous languages, and cultural objects, for instance. But these technologies raise questions about authenticity, ownership, and equitable access. The crux of the problem is to ensure that technological progression does not deplete Africa's plural identities and its intangible heritage. Traditional knowledge systems across the continent are under continuous threat from modernization, globalization, and weak documentation. To this, AI systems carry the cultural inclinations of their creators—most times the external or foreign ones—falsifying or omitting local knowledge. This paper explores the use of AI responsibly to protect and promote African cultural identity in addressing the epistemological gap between local developers and indigenous cultures. It examines tangible uses of AI in protecting folklore, language, oral traditions, and traditional arts and examines the threats of cultural misrepresentation and marginalization in the digital environment. The paper contends for an African-centric, culture-sensitive model of AI building that puts African values, ethics, and participatory paradigms first. Through partnerships with local elders, intellectuals, artists, and technologists, AI can be employed not as a tool of erasure but as a preservation medium. Lastly, the paper calls for interdisciplinary research collaboration, ethical AI development, and de-colonial digital infrastructure that preserves African identities with authenticity, dignity, and agency during the age of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, African Cultural identity, Tech Meets Tradition and Cultural Protection

Introduction

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force across the globe, revolutionizing sectors such as healthcare, education, agriculture, and increasingly, the

preservation of cultural heritage. With its capacity to process vast datasets, detect patterns, and generate insights, AI presents immense potential in digitizing, archiving, and revitalizing cultural traditions. Technologies such as machine learning, computer vision, and natural language processing are already playing significant roles in conserving oral histories, endangered languages, ancient manuscripts, and material artefacts in many parts of the world. In Africa—a continent renowned for its cultural plurality and deep-rooted traditions—this potential remains largely underutilized, despite the pressing threat of cultural erosion driven by globalization, urbanization, and societal neglect.

This reality is particularly evident in culturally rich regions such as Benue State, Nigeria, home to diverse ethnic groups like the Tiv, Idoma, Igede, and Etulo. These communities possess vibrant oral traditions, artistic expressions, and indigenous knowledge systems, much of which remain undocumented and vulnerable to extinction. Oral histories, folktales, songs, rituals, and material artefacts risk being lost as generational knowledge transmission wanes. The limited integration of AI into efforts to preserve these identities raises urgent questions about the future of African cultural memory and the sustainability of indigenous heritage.

Technologies could be used to develop digital archives of Tiv folktales or translate endangered dialects. Computer vision could help digitally reconstruct cultural attire, artefacts, or traditional architecture, while machine learning could support the classification and dissemination of traditional music and dances. However, current AI systems are often developed without cultural contextualization, leading to risks of misrepresentation or outright exclusion of African cultural narratives in digital ecosystems. This paper seeks to explore how AI can be ethically and effectively employed to safeguard African cultural identity, with a specific focus on Benue State as a case study. It examines the technological, ethical, and socio-cultural implications of using AI to support oral traditions and communal values that form the bedrock of identity in many African societies. By critically evaluating both the opportunities and limitations of AI in cultural conservation, the study aims to bridge the gap between technological advancement and traditional wisdom.

Ultimately, this paper advocates for a culturally sensitive, community-centered approach to AI deployment one that recognizes and respects local values while empowering communities to take ownership of their heritage in the digital age. By identifying culturally acceptable and inclusive strategies for integrating AI into heritage preservation, the study contributes to the broader discourse on protecting African identities in an era where tech increasingly meets tradition.

Conceptual Structure

Artificial Intelligence (AI) refers to the computer science discipline involved in creating systems capable of performing tasks that otherwise require human intelligence. These include learning, reasoning, problem-solving, perception, and language comprehension.

AI systems operate by processing vast quantities of data using algorithms designed to mimic thinking mechanisms, enabling them to make decisions, learn from experience, and adapt to new data. The purpose of AI is not just to imitate human intelligence but also to extend it in fields such as data processing, pattern recognition, and automation, revolutionizing industries and human life with technology (Russell & Norvig, 2020, pp. 1–3).

The evolution of AI is based on interdisciplinary research borrowing from mathematics, linguistics, neuroscience, and computer engineering. It can be categorized into narrow AI, which performs particular tasks, and general AI, which aims to execute any intellectual task a human, can do. Although AI offers numerous benefits, such as increased efficiency and innovative applications in healthcare, finance, and education, it also raises ethical concerns including privacy violations, job displacement, and accountability for decisions. As AI advances, understanding its societal impacts becomes crucial to harness its potential responsibly (Nilsson, 2010, pp. 5–7).

Cultural identity: refers to the shared characteristics, values, traditions, language, beliefs, and practices that define a group of people and distinguish them from others. It plays a fundamental role in shaping individual and collective sense of belonging, worldview, and social behaviour. According to Hall (1996), cultural identity is not a fixed essence but a dynamic and evolving process shaped by history, culture, and power. In the African context, cultural identity is deeply embedded in oral traditions, rituals, festivals, language, and communal practices that have been passed down through generations. These elements provide continuity and coherence within communities and serve as a source of pride, resilience, and meaning, especially in the face of historical challenges like colonialism, globalization, and cultural imperialism. The erosion of cultural identity often leads to social fragmentation, loss of indigenous knowledge, and disconnection from ancestral roots.

Moreover, cultural identity is not only a marker of heritage but also a living reality that guides responses to modern challenges. As technology continues to influence daily life, there is an urgent need to ensure that advancements like Artificial Intelligence (AI) do not further marginalize or distort indigenous identities. Scholars such as Smith (1999) argue that decolonizing cultural knowledge and reaffirming indigenous identity is vital for self-determination and cultural survival. In this light, preserving cultural identity involves more than archiving artefacts it requires empowering communities to define how their stories, languages, and traditions are represented in the digital space. Thus, culturally grounded technologies and inclusive digital policies are essential for safeguarding and transmitting cultural identity in ways that are authentic, respectful, and future-oriented.

Protection refers to the process of actively maintaining, conserving, and safeguarding objects, traditions, environments, or information from harm, destruction, decay, or loss. It is a crucial practice across many disciplines, including cultural studies, environmental science, and information technology. In the context of cultural heritage, protection ensures that artefacts, monuments, languages, and traditions remain intact and accessible for future generations. For example, the restoration and ongoing maintenance of the Great Wall of China serve as a prominent case of architectural protection that preserves a cultural symbol of national heritage and identity (Lowenthal, 2015). Protection extends beyond physical objects to include intangible elements like oral traditions, music, and rituals, often involving documentation, education, and intergenerational transmission. Community-based programs aimed at protecting indigenous languages help prevent linguistic extinction and promote cultural diversity.

The concept of protection, therefore, encompasses more than just the safeguarding of physical or tangible heritage; it also involves the preservation of the underlying values, knowledge systems, and practices that define human societies (Taylor, 2018). This holistic approach emphasizes the importance of cultural continuity and the empowerment of communities in actively participating in the stewardship of their heritage. Through culturally sensitive protection strategies, societies can maintain their unique identities while adapting to contemporary challenges, ensuring that heritage remains a living and relevant part of social life.

Technological Progress in AI Recent Developments in AI Relevant to Culture

Technological improvements in Artificial Intelligence (AI) have significantly revolutionized many domains, including the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. Artificial intelligence programs are increasingly capable of simulating human mental processes such as learning, reasoning, and perception. Recent developments in machine learning, neural networks, and natural language processing (NLP) have enabled computers to handle large quantities of cultural data and produce useful outcomes. Such developments have made it possible for cultural knowledge preservation, interpretation, and sharing across the globe (Russell & Norvig, 2010, p. 57). One of the major domains where AI has made an impact is digitization the process of converting physical cultural artifacts, manuscripts, and art into digital format. AI applications can scan and revive bits of history in 3D, preserving them for future generations and putting them on the internet. For instance, the British Museum uses AI to digitally restore ancient sculptures and documents so that researchers and the general public worldwide can learn and interact with them remotely (Smith, 2020, p. 103). This implies that even endangered or decaying artifacts are not lost to history.

Machine learning, one of the forms of AI, has enabled the categorization and interpretation of cultural data on an unprecedented scale. Algorithms are also able to identify the

homogeneity of style in art, trace the lineage of artifacts, and detect forgery based on pattern recognition. Machine learning programs have been used to categorize traditional music rhythms and weavers' patterns in African cultural studies so that local knowledge systems can be better documented (Adejumobi, 2019, p. 88). Aside from enhancing research at the academic level, this can also instil pride and continuity among local communities. NLP has further advanced AI's cultural relevance by facilitating the analysis and translation of indigenous languages. With the decline of many African languages, NLP tools help in recording, processing, and revitalizing them. Projects like Google's AI-supported language preservation initiative now provide speech recognition and translation services for languages such as Yoruba and Swahili, promoting their usage in digital spaces (Taylor, 2021, p. 65). This contributes to linguistic diversity and strengthens cultural identity in contemporary times.

Another newer trend is utilizing AI in narrative and heritage learning. AI platforms can craft tales from history texts, individual testimonies, and cultural myths and legends and make them more appealing to modern listeners. For example, virtual museums and folklore- or history-narration chat bots have been developed to educate youth while protecting oral traditions. These technologies blend old knowledge with new technology to offer cultural sensitivity in contemporary settings (Kato, 2022, p. 129). AI also assists in the preservation of cultural heritage in times of war or disaster. Predictive models can assess the vulnerability of cultural sites to natural or human-made threats, enabling timely interventions. UNESCO and other global agencies have employed AI-based monitoring systems to track and protect world heritage sites in conflict areas or climate-risk zones. These applications illustrate how technological progress can be balanced with cultural conservation efforts for lasting impacts (UNESCO, 2019, p. 45).

AI developments are working to both preserve and promote culture, especially in African settings. From machine learning and NLP to virtual education and digitization, AI is making culture more accessible while preserving it. As the technologies further evolve, their ethical application and engagement in communities are key to ensuring that they serve as tools for cultural empowerment and participation, and not erasure or exploitation (Smith, 2020, p. 117). Chances for African heritage documentation and access have greatly expanded with the advent of digital technologies and increased global demand for indigenous culture. For the African context, heritage documentation is a central part of maintaining identity, history, and indigenous knowledge systems. Access to heritage allows communities to reconnect with their heritage and improves cultural education among the youth.

The citizens of Benue State, Nigeria, offer a very good example of how such opportunities can be exploited to conserve valuable cultural heritage under threat from erosion caused by modernization and globalization (Smith, 2020, p. 44). According to Torhemen, M. (2018)

one such opportunity lies in the digitization of oral traditions that are central to Tiv cultural heritage. Tiv people possess a wealth of folktales, proverbs, songs, and rituals that have been kept alive for generations through oral tradition. With the use of digital recording devices, smart phones, and cloud storage, the oral traditions can now be recorded, transcribed, and kept safe for posterity. For instance, community projects in Makurdi and Gboko have started digitally archiving *kwagh-hir* performances Tiv Masquerade Theatre replete with moral teaching and social commentary (Adejunmobi, 2019, p. 71).

Another option is the documentation and preservation of the Tiv language and linguistic speech. Since many African languages are facing extinction, using NLP technologies to document and develop digital dictionaries or translation software has never been more promising. In collaboration with universities and technology companies, Tiv scholars have begun developing e-dictionaries and grammars to facilitate language learning and scholarship. These resources promote the availability of Tiv language resources for both native speakers and global researchers (Taylor, 2021, p. 92). Cultural festivals and exhibitions also provide a platform for the documentation and presentation of intangible and tangible heritage. Traditional festivals such as the "Tiv Day" celebration in Benue State bring traditional dancers, artists, and historians together to perform and showcase cultural artifacts. The events are increasingly being recorded and transmitted through digital means, reaching far beyond local boundaries. They also create opportunities for partnerships with museums and heritage institutions for permanent archiving and documentation (UNESCO, 2019, p. 36).

Mobile and internet-based applications also promise heritage transmission and education. Online learning platforms now have interactive content on Tiv history, traditional schools of thought, and craftsmanship, accessible to learners around the country and in the diaspora. The apps provide locally relevant material and facilitate projects like the integration of local knowledge into the mainstream school system. For example, some Benue secondary schools currently use computer software to discover more about such local Tiv instruments as *indyer* and *akya*, bringing cultural awareness to the youth (Kato, 2022, p. 111).

In addition, the involvement of local communities in documenting heritage is necessary to ensure authenticity and sustainability. Collaborative programs between local elders, youth associations, NGOs, and universities have been effective in collecting oral traditions, documenting family lineages, and mapping ancestral sites. Projects such as the Tiv heritage documentation initiative engage local storytellers and tradition bearers, digitally literating them to lead the preservation process. This participatory process promotes cultural pride and knowledge transfer across generations (Smith, 2020, p. 88)

Threats and Challenges to Preservation of Culture

Protection faces numerous threats and challenges, especially in rapidly modernizing societies. Native cultures in Africa, for instance, are constantly threatened by the processes of globalization, urbanization, and the degeneration of native values. These processes often exclude indigenous heritage and promote alien ways of living that may not be compatible with indigenous traditions. For the Tiv, this has gradually resulted in reduced usage of language, customary narration, social rituals, and festivities particularly among youth who are increasingly inclined toward Western ideals (Smith, 2020, p. 58).

Among the most significant challenges is the decline in indigenous languages, which are crucial vehicles for cultural values, cosmologies, and oral traditions. The Tiv language, although still spoken by many, is gradually being replaced by English and Pidgin, especially in urban areas and schools. This language shift endangers Tiv oral literature, proverbs, and naming practices. The poor documentation of Tiv language materials exacerbates the situation, leaving future generations with limited access to their linguistic heritage (Taylor, 2021, p. 101). Technological limitations also pose a threat to cultural heritage. Although computer technologies can support heritage documentation, internet and electricity are scarce in many Benue State villages. As a result, elders and oral narrators—many of whom are not digitally literate—often cannot effectively use such technologies. This digital divide hinders local communities from participating actively in cultural preservation efforts, contributing to the ongoing loss of valuable cultural expressions (UNESCO, 2019, p. 37).

Commoditization and misinterpretation of culture also present critical challenges. Tiv dances, clothing, and *kwagh-hir* performances are often commercialized for tourism without proper context or respect for their sacred meanings. This undermines their cultural significance, turning meaningful traditions into mere entertainment. Additionally, external researchers and businesses sometimes exploit cultural resources without the involvement or consent of the native people raising ethical concerns and disempowering those whose heritage is being showcased (Adejunmobi, 2022, p. 77). Violent conflicts, land disputes, and political unrest in parts of Nigeria, including Benue State, have further disrupted cultural practices and displaced communities. When people are uprooted or feel insecure, traditional ceremonies, festivals, and communal structures suffer. For instance, communal cultivation festivals and lineage worship ceremonies among the Tiv have been severely impacted by farmer-herder conflicts, forcing elders the custodians of these traditions—to flee (Kato, 2021, p. 123). This physical and psychological displacement hinders cultural continuity.

The threats and challenges to cultural preservation among the Tiv include language loss, technological barriers, cultural commodification, and social dislocation. Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts from government bodies, educational institutions, local

communities, and international agencies. Sustainable preservation of Tiv heritage must be inclusive, accessible, and ethically grounded, ensuring that the culture is not only documented but also experienced and nurtured by current and future generations (Smith, 2020, p. 63).

Issues of Digital Colonialism and Misrepresentation of Culture

Digital colonialism and cultural misrepresentation are emerging issues in the age of globalization and digital technology. Digital colonialism refers to the control of powerful states and corporations over digital infrastructure, data, and content creation, typically at the expense of less developed nations and indigenous cultures. This control enables external actors to define, represent, and even manipulate non-native cultures. As Gilroy (2017) warns, “new forms of imperial control are enacted through algorithms and platforms that shape cultural consumption” (p. 89). This creates an imbalance where African cultural narratives are filtered through Western eyes, reinforcing stereotypes or erasing cultural authenticity.

Cultural misrepresentation is likely to occur when African cultures are represented without proper context, consultation, or understanding. For instance, African masks or rituals may be displayed in Western museums or media as exotic artifacts, stripped of their religious or social significance and reduced to mere aesthetic objects. Hall (1997) argues that such representations “other” African culture by creating an essentialized, static identity that does not reflect the dynamic, lived experiences of African peoples (p. 225).

These representations not only shape Africans' self-perceptions but also influence how others engage with African heritage, often reinforcing colonial-era narratives of primitiveness or mysticism. In digital spaces, such misrepresentation is amplified by algorithmic bias and the dominance of platforms owned by corporations headquartered in the Global North. These platforms tend to promote Western-oriented content while concealing or distorting indigenous voices. Couldry and Mejias (2019) caution that data collected from African users is rarely reciprocated in the form of empowering or culturally meaningful content, contributing to “data colonialism” that sustains global inequality (p. 115). As a result, African digital heritage becomes underrepresented or misrepresented in the global information ecosystem.

Furthermore, the lack of African control over digital archives and platforms exacerbates digital colonialism. Much of the digitized African cultural heritage is stored in foreign institutions or in cloud services owned by global tech companies. For example, historical African artifacts, documents, and photographs are often housed in European libraries and digitized without meaningful collaboration with African scholars or communities. Emeagwali (2016) stresses that this situation produces a knowledge imbalance, as “Africa's intellectual and cultural properties are harvested and monetized without reciprocity or acknowledgment” (p. 48).

To resist digital colonialism and cultural misrepresentation, activists and scholars advocate for digital sovereignty, the production of local content, and community-led digitization projects. Initiatives such as the African Digital Heritage project and the Sankofa Pan-African Library seek to create platforms through which African communities can narrate their histories, control their data, and represent their culture in authentic ways.

According to Nyamnjoh (2015), digital inclusion must extend beyond infrastructure and access to encompass cultural integrity and epistemological justice (p. 134). These efforts aim to decolonize the digital environment and promote more respectful, accurate representations of African cultures

Community Engagement and Participatory Approaches

Community involvement and participatory approaches have played a crucial role in the conservation and promotion of cultural heritage, especially where customary traditions and knowledge are at risk of loss. In Africa, people have been able to stake their claims to their heritage through community-based programs, ensuring not only survival but also transmission to future generations. The activities carried out by institutions such as the African Heritage Foundation (AHF) in Nigeria exemplify how the participation of local communities in heritage preservation can lead to more meaningful and sustainable outcomes. As Emeagwali (2016) contends, “when communities are directly involved, the process of cultural preservation becomes more meaningful and aligned with their own values” (p. 47). This participatory approach enables the integration of indigenous knowledge systems and cultural values into the preservation process.

One of the most significant contributions of participatory approaches is the sense of ownership and empowerment generated among local communities. For example, in the preservation of indigenous languages in Kenya, local communities have participated in documenting and translating oral traditions and dialects. This community-oriented strategy not only helps maintain linguistic heritage but also fosters pride among locals regarding their cultural identity. Birhane (2020) states that “local ownership of heritage projects ensures that cultural narratives are preserved authentically, without external distortion” (p. 92). Such programs instil a lasting legacy, as community members are directly engaged in the conservation process.

However, despite these successes, there are notable challenges to community engagement in cultural heritage preservation. A major issue is the lack of adequate resources and technical skills in many local communities, which hampers effective documentation and conservation. While external partners such as academics and NGOs are often involved, their presence may introduce tensions concerning control and direction of the project. As

Tchindebet (2018) explains, “While outside aid is typically invaluable, it is at risk of drowning out the voices of the very individuals it is attempting to assist” (p. 138). Such imbalances can compromise the autonomy and legitimacy of heritage initiatives, making collaborative and respectful partnerships essential.

Another limitation is the issue of sustainability. Most community-led initiatives struggle to secure long-term funding and institutional backing. For instance, a successful initiative to record Tiv oral traditions in Benue State eventually collapsed after external funding ceased. Without sustainable financial models, these efforts can lose momentum quickly. This highlights the need for strategies that ensure the continuity of projects beyond their initial phases. As Nyamnjoh (2015) also notes, “sustainability in heritage preservation requires not just financial resources, but the development of local capacities to manage and maintain projects over time” (p. 145). Therefore, training and education are vital for building local capacity and ensuring that cultural preservation efforts endure.

Strategies for Harmonizing Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Cultural Protection

Aligning Artificial Intelligence (AI) with cultural preservation in Benue State, particularly among the Tiv people, requires a conscious strategy that promotes technology as a tool for safeguarding and advancing indigenous heritage. One foundational approach is emphasizing community participation in AI initiatives. As seen in the "Masakhane" project for African languages, involving local communities in developing AI tools—such as machine learning models for language processing—ensures that solutions are rooted in authentic cultural contexts (Nekoto et al., 2020, p. 60). In Benue State, Tiv elders, linguists, and cultural custodians must be directly engaged in AI-driven projects intended to document and preserve Tiv oral traditions, ensuring that AI systems accurately reflect and respect their heritage.

Another key strategy involves using AI for digital archiving, with a commitment to community access. Computer systems can record and digitize oral histories, music, rituals, and traditional arts, making them more accessible without eroding their cultural significance. For instance, the African Digital Heritage project demonstrated how AI could be used to preserve and classify archival materials efficiently and cost-effectively (Mwangi, 2019, p. 78). A similar framework could be applied in Benue State to create a digital repository of Tiv folktales, proverbs, and ceremonies, enabling both local and global audiences to engage with this cultural legacy. Strategic AI application in archiving helps bridge traditional preservation methods with modern technological innovations.

To ensure that AI technologies are aligned with indigenous values, it is crucial to integrate ethical frameworks that prioritize respect for native knowledge systems. Scholars like Emeagwali (2016) advocate for incorporating indigenous ethical principles in the design

and deployment of AI (p. 47). In the context of Tiv heritage preservation, this means collaborating with cultural experts to prevent AI systems from misrepresenting or distorting traditional knowledge. For example, AI tools used to translate Tiv oral literature must be carefully designed to capture not only literal meanings but also the cultural nuances, tone, and oral traditions embedded in the language. A culturally-sensitive model reduces the risk of perpetuating stereotypes or inaccuracies.

Moreover, building local capacity in AI technology is essential for the long-term sustainability of cultural preservation projects in Benue State. Training local practitioners and youth in AI development and heritage management ensures these initiatives are not wholly dependent on external funding or technical expertise. As Nyamnjoh (2015) notes, “sustainability in heritage preservation requires not just financial resources, but the development of local capacities to manage and maintain projects over time” (p. 145). Establishing AI training centers focused on cultural conservation in Benue could empower a new generation of culturally grounded, tech-savvy custodians who can sustain and expand such efforts.

Conclusion

In the final analysis therefore, effective collaboration among government agencies, local communities, and academic institutions is essential for successfully integrating Artificial Intelligence with the protection of African cultural identity, particularly in Benue State. Such partnerships could enable the sharing of resources, knowledge, and technical expertise, in creating a strong foundation for culturally sensitive AI initiatives. For instance, the preservation of the Tiv language can be significantly enhanced through cooperation with local institutions like Benue State University, which can contribute to the development of AI tools tailored to the specific cultural context while maintaining rigorous academic standards.

This collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach ensures that efforts to protect cultural heritage are well-supported, sufficiently funded, and widely accepted within the community. As Tchindebet notes, “community-led AI projects can support cultural sustainability by empowering local custodians of heritage,” underscoring the importance of inclusive involvement in technology-driven preservation. Ultimately, such partnerships hold the promise of creating AI solutions that are not only innovative but also deeply rooted in cultural understanding, fostering sustainable protection of African identities in the digital era.

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