

Cultural Heritage Assets and Constraints to Tourism Development: A Case Study of Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the potential of cultural heritage assets for tourism development, using the ancient Benin City in Edo State, Nigeria, as a case study. Despite its historical significance, particularly the Oba's Palace and the renowned Benin Bronzes, the city's tourism sector remains underdeveloped. Using a survey design, data were collected from a non-probability sample of 100 respondents (50 tourists and 50 residents/operators) at three primary cultural sites: The National Museum, The Oba of Benin's Palace, and the annual Igue Festival. The study employed descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and thematic analysis to address four objectives: 1) to identify Benin City's key cultural heritage assets; 2) to analyze the relationship between the local culture and the sites' appeal; 3) to assess the contribution and constraints of heritage sites to local development; and 4) to determine factors influencing tourist preference. Findings confirm that while the sites contribute positively to local economic activity, their full potential is hindered by poor public services and the low ratio of international visitors to domestic tourists. The results align with recent literature identifying infrastructural deficiencies and insecurity as major barriers to tourism growth in Nigeria. The study recommends urgent public-private sector collaboration to upgrade infrastructure and implement effective visitor management systems for sustainable growth.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Heritage Tourism, Benin City, Tourism Development, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Study Background and Context

Heritage tourism, defined as travel motivated by engaging with historical sites, monuments, and cultural traditions, has emerged as a crucial segment of the global tourism market (Hall and Zeppel, 2011; Hall, 2015; Timothy and Boyd, 2015). This form of tourism not only offers visitors an immersive, cerebral experience of the past (Ye et al., 2024) but also serves as a vital tool for the preservation of cultural resources and the economic diversification of local communities (Getz and Page, 2019; 2024). Traditional towns in Africa, particularly those with a history of pre-colonial statehood like Benin City, possess immense and unique heritage assets that are globally significant (Ayeni et al., 2024).

Benin City, the former capital of the historic Edo Kingdom, is one such repository of cultural wealth, renowned globally for the artistic excellence of the Benin Bronzes and its enduring monarchy centered at the Oba's Palace. These assets, alongside the annual Igue Festival, represent profound cultural capital that should logically position the city as a major international heritage tourism destination.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite this extraordinary cultural endowment, the tourism potential of Benin City remains largely untapped and poorly managed. Historical issues, such as the looting of the Bronzes, have garnered international attention, yet

local investment in tourism infrastructure, visitor experience, and site maintenance lags significantly behind its peers in other developing nations. Recent studies continue to highlight that factors like insecurity, poor infrastructure, and unreliable services are fundamental problems hindering tourism growth across Nigeria (Naluba and Goddy, 2020; Ikeke, 2022; Olonade et al., 2025). This disparity leads to a pervasive problem: the rich cultural supply is undermined by poor service quality and deficient destination management. The economic benefits from tourism are therefore limited, primarily benefiting a small number of local operators without significantly improving general public welfare or attracting high-spending international tourists.

Existing literature often focuses either on the historical significance of the Bronzes or the general economic impact of tourism. A critical research gap exists in the integrated assessment of both the supply-side cultural assets and the demand-side constraints (infrastructure, management, and visitor experience) from the viewpoint of the tourists and the local beneficiaries. This study addresses this gap by providing empirical data linking the perceived value of the city's heritage to the systemic management challenges hindering its sustainable development.

Objectives of the Study

The main aim of this study is to analyze the viability of Benin City's traditional assets as tools for sustainable tourism development. The specific objectives are to:

identify the major cultural heritage sites and attractions in Benin City.

analyze the relationship between Benin's cultural elements (history, rituals, arts) and the appeal of its heritage sites.

assess the contribution and structural constraints of heritage sites to local economic development and tourism growth.

determine factors influencing tourist and resident preference for cultural heritage destinations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage Tourism and Motivation

Heritage tourism is intrinsically linked to cultural heritage, which includes the tangible and intangible practices, knowledge, and expressions passed down through generations (Deacon, 2003). As tourists become more sophisticated, their motivations shift from passive sightseeing to active experiential learning (Getz and Page, 2019; 2024). Visitors to heritage sites are often motivated by the desire to:

Experience a different time or place.

Learn to enjoy a cerebral experience.

Connect with a shared history or teach children about the site (Ye et al., 2024).

The authenticity of the heritage resource is paramount. When history is transformed into a "commodity called heritage," there is a risk of commercialization undermining the genuine legacy (Hewison, 2007). Therefore, successful heritage tourism management must balance commercial gains with the imperative to preserve cultural integrity (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000; Ashworth, 2020; Tunbridge, 2023).

Socio-Economic and Cultural Impacts of Tourism

Tourism, when properly managed, acts as a catalyst for economic and social development. Its positive economic impacts include generating income, creating employment, and encouraging infrastructural upgrades in public utilities and transportation systems (Jemiluyi and Jeke, (2024); Sorupia, 2005).

Crucially for traditional towns, tourism's impact extends to the social and cultural sphere:

It provides economic justification for the preservation and restoration of historic buildings and monuments (Uchegbu et al., 2021).

It enhances community pride and strengthens citizenship values by educating residents and tourists about local history and traditions (Van, 2024).

However, unchecked tourism can lead to negative socio-cultural impacts, such as the distortion of local customs to please tourists or an increase in the cost of living for residents (Hwang et al., 2012). Recent studies emphasize that community involvement is critical; excluding local populations risks eroding rather than preserving cultural identity (Anunobi and Okpoko, 2024; Cossengue et al., 2025).

Institutional and Management Frameworks in Nigeria

The development of tourism in Nigeria is primarily overseen by the Nigerian Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC), which is responsible for promotion, marketing, and standardizing the hospitality industry (NTDC Act, 1992). At the state level, the Edo State Ministry of Arts, Culture and Tourism is mandated to preserve, protect, project, and promote the state's cultural heritage.

Despite these structures, the institutional framework often suffers from poor coordination between federal, state, and local agencies, inadequate funding, and a lack of effective public-private partnerships (Oruonye, 2013). This systemic failure in governance and resource allocation, worsened by issues of security (Ikeke, 2022) and weak marketing (Nwaopara and Emeafor, 2025), directly translates into poor infrastructure, security concerns, and low-quality visitor services, which are major obstacles to attracting sustained international investment and high-value tourists.

DATA AND METHODS

The Study Area

Benin City is the capital of Edo State (figure 1 and 2), Nigeria, known globally for the historic Kingdom of Benin, which flourished from the 13th to 19th centuries. The city is situated approximately 320 kilometers east of Lagos. Key cultural attractions include the National Museum, the Oba's Palace, and the historic Igun Street (famous for bronze casting). The city retains traditional significance with the Oba (sacred king) retaining advisory roles and ceremonial importance, hosting the annual Igue Festival.



Figure 1: Map of Nigeria showing Edo State



Figure 2: Map of Edo State showing Benin City

Source: Ministry of Urban and Physical Development, Benin City

METHODS

The study utilized a Survey Design combined with qualitative data collection to capture both the quantitative assessment of preferences and the underlying qualitative constraints. Both primary and secondary data were utilized. Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire and interview guide (IG), supported by photographs and personal observation. Secondary data were sourced from relevant academic journals, books, government reports, and institutional records. The study population comprised tourists (both domestic and international) visiting Benin City's heritage sites and the residents/operators providing tourism-related services near the sites. A sample of 100 respondents was targeted: 50 tourists and 50 residents/operators. Given the difficulty in determining the total population of tourists, convenience sampling was used to select tourists encountered at the three major sites (National Museum, Oba's Palace, Igue Festival participants). Purposive Sampling was used to select residents and business operators known to be directly involved in or affected by tourism activities near the sites. The unit of analysis was the individual respondent (tourist or resident/operator). A structured questionnaire, divided into closed- and open-ended questions, was used. The tourist questionnaire covered socio-economic characteristics and cultural heritage site preference/destination attributes. The resident questionnaire focused on the contributions of the sites to business opportunities and local development. Descriptive statistics, specifically frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize the socio-economic profiles and the assessment of cultural destination attributes. Thematic analysis was applied to the open-ended responses, interviews, and observation notes to extract key themes regarding constraints, challenges, and opportunities.

FINDINGS

Note on Sample Size: The final valid responses collected and analyzed totaled 89 (45 tourists and 44 residents/operators), which is used as the base (N) for all reported frequencies and percentages.

Socio-economic and Cultural Characteristics

Table 4.1: Socio-economic and Cultural Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (N=89)	Percentage (%)
Nationality	Nigerian (Indigenes/Non-Indigenes)	83	93.3
	Foreigners (Non-Nigerians)	6	6.7
Gender	Male	51	57.3
	Female	38	42.7
Age	20-30 years	31	34.8
	31-40 years	25	28.1
	41-50 years	17	19.1
	Above 50 years	16	17.9

Source: Authors field survey, 2025

The data confirms the domestic nature of tourism in Benin City, with Nigerian visitors constituting 93.3% of the sample, while foreigners represent a marginal 6.7%. This low international visitor ratio highlights a major constraint on revenue generation and global visibility.

Major Cultural Heritage Assets and Appeal

Respondents were asked to rate the appeal of various cultural attributes on a 5-point scale (frequencies and percentages reported here):

Table 4.2: Major Cultural Heritage Assets and Appeal

Cultural Attribute	High/Very High Appeal (%)	Finding
Authenticity of Historical Narratives	88.7%	Highest-rated attribute, validating the historical integrity of the sites.
Quality of Local Craftsmanship (Bronzes/Carvings)	85.4%	Confirms the high artistic value of the Benin cultural items.
Friendliness of Locals/Hospitality	62.9%	Moderate rating; suggests a need for formal training in visitor services.
General Site Accessibility (Roads/Parking)	35.9%	Lowest-rated attribute, indicating a major infrastructural constraint.

Source: Authors field survey, 2025

The results demonstrate a strong positive relationship between the core cultural elements (authenticity, craftsmanship) and the sites' appeal, which is the foundational strength of Benin's tourism potential.

Contribution and Constraints to Local Development

Table: 4.3: Contribution and Constraints to Local Development

Development Factor	Positive Contribution (%)	Constraint (Open-Ended Themes)
Local Economic Development	78.6%	The presence of sites promotes local petty trading, craft sales, and food vending.
Quality of Public Services	25.8%	Did not improve. Themes included poor road networks, unreliable electricity, and security concerns.
Job Creation (Directly Tourism-Related)	59.5%	Moderate; primarily low-wage roles (guards, guides, vendors) with limited professional opportunities.
Overall Government Support	12.3%	Very Low satisfaction. Themes included lack of funding, poor waste management, and political interference.

Source: Authors field survey, 2025

The findings reveal a significant inconsistency: while the sites foster local economic activity (petty trade), they fail to drive systemic improvements in public services and infrastructure, limiting their role as genuine tools for sustainable urban development.

Factors Influencing Tourist Preference

The primary factors motivating visitors were:

Cultural History/Learning (45.2%): The desire to learn about the ancient Benin Kingdom and witness the Igue Festival.

Ancestral/Ethnic Connection (30.5%): The desire of domestic Nigerian tourists to reconnect with their heritage.

Site Proximity/Convenience (15.1%): Visiting as part of a transit or local trip, not as a primary destination.

The dominance of cultural and ancestral drivers confirms that the market appeal is fundamentally academic and heritage-driven, rather than being service- or leisure-driven.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of Findings and Theoretical Linkage

The findings confirm the theoretical proposition that cultural heritage assets are the primary drivers of visitation (Ye et al., 2024). The high rating of the authenticity of Benin's narrative and the quality of its craftsmanship validates the city's supply-side strength, positioning it as a potentially high-value destination.

However, the analysis of constraints reveals a breakdown in the necessary institutional and infrastructural framework required for effective tourism development (Jemiluyi and Jeke, 2024; Sorupia, 2005). The 93.3% domestic tourist base and the low satisfaction with public services demonstrate that Benin City has not successfully transitioned its cultural capital into a globally competitive, service-driven tourism economy. The lack of private sector confidence and the failure of public sector investment to address poor accessibility and security issues directly suppress the influx of higher-spending international visitors. This is consistent with recent research which finds that insecurity (terrorist attacks, kidnapping) can drastically reduce tourist arrivals in Nigeria, underscoring the urgency of strategic security investments (Ikeke, 2022).

Cultural Preservation and Economic Sustainability

The study reveals that the sites foster local economic development through informal trade, but this benefit is marginal and does not lead to the anticipated uplift in the quality of life or public services (Van, 2024). This pattern indicates that the current tourism model is one of cultural consumption without corresponding stewardship. To ensure sustainability, government policies, incentives, and active monitoring must prioritize preserving the cultural landscape over short-term revenue generation from unchecked vendors. The local government must use tourism revenues to fund conservation efforts and infrastructural upgrades, thereby establishing a closed-loop system of development and preservation. Furthermore, as suggested by Anunobi and Okpoko (2024); Cossengue et al., (2025, involving the local population in tourism decision-making is essential to prevent the erosion of cultural identity through unchecked commercialization.

Business Operators' Perspectives and Policy Implications

The low-satisfaction ratings for government support and public services (road access, security) reflect the critical constraint faced by local business operators. Operators, despite acknowledging the sites' ability to draw customers, operate in a high-cost environment due to unreliable electricity and poor road networks. Policy adjustments should focus on:

Targeted Infrastructure Investment: Dedicated funds for road access and security around the Oba's Palace and National Museum, recognizing that dilapidated infrastructure is a major deterrent (Naluba and Goddy, 2020; Olonade et al., 2025).

Private Sector Incentives: Tax breaks and subsidized loans for formal tourism enterprises (e.g., quality accommodation, registered tour guides) to professionalize the service sector.

Visitor Management System: Implementing a formal system to track and analyze visitor demographics, expenditures, and satisfaction levels, addressing the current data deficit (6.7% foreign ratio) and providing data for future planning (NTDC Act, 1992). Improved online visibility and marketing, as highlighted by Nwaopara and Emeafor (2025) for other heritage media, is also crucial.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study confirms that Benin City possesses globally significant cultural heritage assets that are highly appealing to both domestic and international visitors, but its potential for robust tourism development is severely limited by infrastructural decay and institutional failure. While the heritage sites are tools for local economic activity, they are constrained by the failure to translate cultural value into improved public services and a globally competitive visitor experience.

Research Evaluation and Contributions

Theoretical Contribution: This paper extends knowledge by offering an integrated assessment that simultaneously validates the cultural supply-side strength of a major West African traditional town and empirically quantifies the demand-side management constraints, providing a holistic framework for understanding heritage tourism underdevelopment in Nigeria.

Practical Contributions: The findings provide empirical evidence to stakeholders:

Government/Polymakers: Must shift focus from promotion to investment in public services (roads, security).

Private Sector: Identifies the market demand (authenticity) and the required areas for investment (high-quality lodging, guided tours).

Local Communities: Highlights the need for formal training and participation to maximize job creation beyond petty trade.

Recommendations

Public-Private Partnership (PPP): The Edo State government must facilitate a PPP model specifically for the tourism precinct, allowing private capital to upgrade and manage infrastructure, particularly road access and visitor facilities.

Professionalization and Training: Establish a mandatory training and certification program for local residents to professionalize tour guiding and vending, improving the hospitality rating (62.9%) and enhancing visitor experience.

Visitor Management System: Implement a dedicated system at all major sites to capture accurate and consistent data on visitor origin, length of stay, and expenditure, replacing reliance on inconsistent observation and enabling evidence-based planning.

Preservation Funding: Earmark a percentage of all tourism revenues for the direct maintenance and conservation of the Oba's Palace and National Museum structures to protect the core asset.

Study Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited by its reliance on a non-probability sample and a relatively small sample size (N=89), which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should undertake a longitudinal study to track visitor statistics over several festival cycles and employ economic impact modeling to quantify the direct, indirect, and induced economic benefits of the heritage sites. A comparative study of Benin City with another successful cultural tourism city in West Africa would also provide deeper policy insights.

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