

**REVIVING UNESCO HERITAGE THROUGH VISUAL ARTS: HUMANISING
ECO-ENVIRONMENTALISM AMIDST INDIGENOUS VALUE DIVERGENCE
IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Today, there is little global research on the convergence of UNESCO World Heritage frameworks and eco-environmental art practice in contemporary visual arts in Nigeria. One has to participate in the humanisation of sustainability discourse by incorporating divergent indigenous values and artistic knowledge systems, because world heritage agendas tend to appropriate Western environmentalist models; they often fail to recognise non-Western relational worldviews that interconnect ecology, spirituality, and culture. The implications of disconnection between place and practice are magnified in places like Nigeria, where the expression of culture is not purely material or intangible but also ecological, ritualistic, and sensate. Drawing on a range of artworks produced in Nigeria, this study seeks to interrogate how Nigerian visual artists deploy local epistemologies and materials to reconceptualise environmental ethics, dismantle colonial notions of preservationism, and revitalise heritage as a performative practice. Based on case studies of artists such as Nike Davis-Okundaye, Ozioma Onuzulike, Victor Onibere, Peju Alatise, Peter Fanwgle Dalong, and the Osogbo Art Movement (Twin Seven Seven), the study employs qualitative and arts-based methods (visual analysis and thematic coding). The artists act as cultural theorists and ecological mediators that embed environmental memory and ancestral knowledge in their materials, processes, and narratives. Their practice operates as a decolonial aesthetics of care that combats the static nature of conservation through a living-centred projection of eco-heritage. The study concludes by arguing for a pluralised, more inclusive reimagining of UNESCO heritage that recognises indigenous artistic craftsmanship as both a repository and an advocate for the (re)formation of sustainable futures.

Keywords: UNESCO World Heritage, Indigenous Knowledge, Eco-aesthetics, Cultural Sustainability, Nigerian Visual Arts, Decolonial Environmentalism.

Introduction

Since the adoption of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention) in 1972, it has served as a prominent instrument for nominating, proclaiming values, protecting, and managing properties of outstanding universal value. It has made a strong contribution to international conservation and cultural and diplomatic discourses, notably in postcolonial settings, where heritage is a form of historical reclamation and global recognition (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2022; UNESCO, 2021). In Africa, and especially in Nigeria, the operationalisation of UNESCO's heritage guidelines grapples with multiple cultural inheritances, sacred topography, and shifting socio-ecological terrains. The two UNESCO World Heritage Sites inscribed in Nigeria to date, the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove and the Sukur Cultural Landscape, constitute only part of the country's diverse

cultural ecologies (Oladeji et al., 2022). Nigeria's official relationship with UNESCO World Heritage, however, has not been without major problems. Among those are a lack of finance and attention, poor community participation, weak alignment with local policy, and, on occasion, emphasis on conservation of the actual materiality of these sites to the detriment of the intangible knowledge systems that sustain the sites (Oyeleye & Bigon, 2025; Day et al, 2022). Take, for instance, the Osun-Osogbo Grove remains vulnerable to urban encroachment and ritual dilution, even as it gains visibility through annual festivals and artistic affiliations. Similarly, the heritage site of Sukur, for example, with its rare local monumentality and indigenous leadership, is endangered by displacement, insecurity and insufficient public support.

At the same time, in Nigeria, the visual arts ecosystem, from traditional practices to contemporary installations, has become critical to the reinterpretation of heritage beyond static conservation. Artists are substrate mediators who are reviving ancient knowledge in material form and interacting with environmental subjects that are cosmologically and communally relevant. This system functions within and beyond institutional circuits, which serve as the meeting point of local values and global heritage regimes. Engaging with clay, textile, performance, digital technologies, and other forms of visual exploration in addressing the return of climate and spiritual memory to the forefront, these artists are addressing other types of dichotomies as well, such as that of modernity and tradition, through a rethinking of what would be a more spontaneous, fluid, human-centric approach to eco-heritage. Heritage preservation and environmental narratives in Nigeria often alienate indigenous epistemologies and material cultures that have historically nurtured the landscapes of things. This gap stems from the global heritage regime, which prioritises the Universalist qualities and monumentality of culture, thereby undermining the cosmological, ritual, and performative aspects of African heritage (Ugwuanyi, 2020). The environmental mainstream, likewise, fails to take into account local systems of value and communal relations to land, spirit, and memory, thereby reducing sustainability to a technocratic or conservationist imperative, shorn of cultural impact.

This research examines how Nigerian visual artists are reimagining and reanimating heritage to humanise eco-environmentalism. It is at the intersection of art, indigenous ecology, and a set of rules for managing the world, as defined by UNESCO. The central investigative questions, however, include: How have Nigerian artists (re)imagined heritage and eco-consciousness? Moreover, how do divergent indigenous values facilitate or complicate heritage revival? By posing these questions, the study aims to identify artistic practices that exceed the constraints of current conservation models and move toward new, more culturally situated, embodied alternatives. In doing so, the study elaborates on a burgeoning corpus of interdisciplinary scholarship in heritage studies, the environmental humanities, and contemporary art. It argues for a reformulation of cultural sustainability that expands to include art, both in theory and in practice, native ecological knowledge, and evocative dialogues. For policymakers and organisations such as UNESCO, the investigation provides an example of how heritage revival can be promoted not only through documentation or conservation but also through living practices bound up in visual and material cultures. In the era of climate change and heritage at risk, this offers artists and activists new spaces for art-based environmental storytelling and culturally meaningful advocacy.

Theoretical & Conceptual Clarification

Theoretically, this study is grounded in the philosophy of relational ontology, which maintains that beings, materials, and meanings do not exist in themselves but are generated through relations of becoming and entanglement (Escobar, 2018; Kelbessa, 2018). Within such an ontological world, Nigerian visual art, heritage sites, indigenous cosmology, and eco-crisis are not conceived as separate categories but as agents that condition one another in shaping the remaking of culture, memory, and resistance. Relational ontology thereby permits a reimagining of heritage and environmentalism as neither fixed nor universal, but as fluid, embodied and culturally situated entities. By engaging with posthumanism, this study disrupts the anthropocentric foundations of mainframe heritage and environmental discourses. It interrogates the idea of humans as the only subjects of history, agency, and conservation, preferring to adopt the theory that materials, sites, and spirits are also actants; that they have the potential to act and to be acted upon (Nkanga et al., 2022; Latour, 2005). This also resonates with many Nigerian indigenous ontologies, in which rivers, groves, earth, and even pigments are not passive backgrounds but living, animated beings imbued with spiritual and ancestral energies. For example, sacred groves such as Osun-Osogbo are not simply heritage sites; they are living, relational spaces in which ecological consciousness is evoked through ritual, art, and communal memory.

Building upon this, Afrocentric eco-environmentalism insists that environmental ethics within African contexts are fundamentally linked to spiritual cosmologies and land or kinship. In contrast to Western models, which frequently separate the natural environment from the cultural, the Afrocentric perspective is seen as a sacred continuum of the life-world, including gods, ancestors and the descendants (Chemhuru, 2024; Ojomo, 2011). Nigerian artists who work from such traditions are not just representing nature, they are communicating with it in eco-spiritual acts that seem to revive ethical relationships with land and ancestral heritage. This is seen in artists such as Nike Davies-Okundaye and the Osogbo Art Movement, who employ visual imagery to perpetuate spiritual traditions surrounding rivers, fecundity, and earth-bound ritual aesthetics.

Woven into this conversation is new materialism, which reimagines matter (whether clay, dye, fibre, ash, etc.) not as a means but as an agent of culture and cultural making (Bennett, 2010; Cooler & Frost, 2010). The material of Nigerian visual art tends to be laden with historical and ecological resonance. For example, Ozioma Onuzulike's use of terracotta and seed in his ceramic work is not only aesthetic but also a question of extractivism, colonial violence, environmental uncertainties, and the proposition of a healing and regenerative ethic. That is what is inherent to a relational concept of heritage: that materials remember; that the artist is a conduit, a facilitator of conversation between form, land and spirit. Overall, this tapestry of layered charters provides a solid framework for understanding the way contemporary Nigerian visual artists contribute to the humanisation of eco-environmentalism and the revival of UNESCO World Heritage. They shed light on the constraints of heritage policies, which value material monuments over intangible, lived practices, and on environmentalist discourses that sideline indigenous epistemologies. This framework instead offers a vision of cultural sustainability as material, spiritual, and relational, which is both situated in intertwined pasts and reawakened through art as an engine of reconciliation and re-enchantment.

Indigenous Epistemologies as Valid Frameworks for Sustainability

Indigenous epistemologies provide holistic yet situated systems of knowledge that are deeply embedded in the experiences, spiritualities, and ecological relations of local peoples (Warekoromor, 2024; 2022). Unlike the predominant Western approaches to sustainability, which tend to focus on technocratic or utilitarian value systems, indigenous ways of knowing are holistic and relational, incorporating humans, non-humans, and ancestors as participants in the social-ecological realm. These are epistemologies in which nature is a dynamic, interconnected ecology that is alive with moral and spiritual imperatives, rather than an object to be used and managed. Take, for instance, some traditional communities in Nigeria, such as the Yoruba, rivers, forests and groves; they take the form of sacred repositories and beings that require reciprocal care and ritual attention (Johnson, 2022). These views undermine the anthropocentric assumptions of mainstream Western environmental activism, in favour of a cosmocentric ethic, in which the sacredness, continuity and integrity of life, in all its myriad forms, is the fundamental measure of sustainable progress.

One reason indigenous epistemologies are critical for sustainable development is their intergenerational sustainability and adaptability. Knowledge systems are not dead artefacts of the past, but adaptive frameworks that weave observation, oral history, performance, and embodied practice in response to shifting environmental and cultural circumstances. For example, the Tiv, Ibibio, and even the Ijaws of Nigeria integrate rotational farming (including fish farming) with seasonal ceremonies that demonstrate ecological wisdom (Warekoromor, 2021). Analogously, ceramic and textile arts are material repositories of ecological memory, signifying information embedded about soil types, water quantities, and varied firing cycles (Ojie & Egede, 2010). Its practices, when seen as a repertoire of epistemic technologies, rather than superstition or folklore, emerge as legitimate modes of ecological governance, climate resilience, and cultural sustainability. Incorporating these approaches within larger policy frameworks is set to help align environmental goals with the values and experiences of communities.

Nevertheless, the credibility of indigenous ways of knowing is persistently compromised by colonial vestiges, epistemic violence and global heritage discourses that tend to favour scientific rationalism over cultural particularities and peculiarities. This has resulted in the alienation of indigenous peoples from elite institutions such as UNESCO, which prioritises conservationist strategies that exclude local involvement in favour of aesthetics or ‘monument’ focused measures (Rashidi, 2025). However, changes to decolonial scholarship and sustainable development discourse are starting to recognise the epistemological plurality that indigenous systems embody. Through the concept of knowledge democracy, scholars argue that indigenous and scientific knowledge can coexist, build on, and strengthen one another. In this way, indigenous epistemologies can be reframed not as additions, but as crucial to the development of culturally responsive, ethically inflected and ecologically sustainable futures.

Art as Activism, Cultural Diplomacy, and Interpretive Intervention

Art demonstrations have a long history of providing visual and performative terrain for challenging power, articulating resistance, and imagining other possible futures. In the Nigerian situation, art as activism works not simply through overt political argument but through symbolic, material, and spatial interventions that confront ecological exploitation, cultural erasure, and social dislocation. Artists such as Ozioma Onuzulike work with clay, seed, and scorched surfaces to comment on extractive capitalism and its environmental fallout, drawing on historical memory and resistance (Nwigwe et al., 2024). Through his work, art becomes a kind of “material protest” that engages the body, the earth, and the senses; historically, it suggests a more personal and affective form of civic engagement. Such activism transcends slogans, metaphors and campaigns that reshape our perceptions of knowledge, identities, and environments (Ojie-Ogwu & Edewor, 2014).

At the intersection of art and diplomacy, visual culture serves as a vital tool of soft power and international cultural relations, particularly during challenging or fruitless political periods (Muscat, 2020; Nye, 2008; 1990). In Nigeria, organisations such as the Nike Art Gallery and the Osogbo Art School have promoted indigenous aesthetics on an international scale while also providing economic and social benefits to local communities. This nature becomes a form of cultural diplomacy that provides cross-cultural insights and a counter-perspective to Western-centric narratives of heritage, modernity, and sustainability. Artists exploring heritage, ecology, and spirituality often serve as unofficial ambassadors, interpreting indigenous values, environmental issues, and concerns for local and global audiences. This is no longer representational but performative diplomacy in practice, implemented through exhibitions, workshops, festivals, and collaborative public projects that remap art as a medium for transnational and transcultural relations.

Lastly, art plays a significant role as an interpretive intrusion into the dominant conceptualisations of heritage and environmental issues, especially those created by institutions such as UNESCO. Visual artists question how heritage is conserved, classified, and exhibited, providing alternate histories that focus on the local epistemologies of embodied memory. By nourishing environmental ethics in culturally embedded forms such as in textiles, ceramics, mural paintings, and sculpture, artists open a way for the reimagining of heritage as not a fixed past but a process of dialogic, living negotiation and renewal. These artistic works intervene in public consciousness, forcing viewers to regard landscapes not just as scenery but as stories that are sacred to their history. By doing so, Nigerian artists can engage in visual activism that not only critiques but also rebuilds ancestral knowledge, artistic practice, and the current eco-political vernacular.

Indigenous Values and Eco-aesthetics in Nigerian Visual Arts

Nigerian indigenous visual traditions are based on pluralised ecological views and the spiritual, social, and environmental realities of diverse, ethnically based communal contexts. From the Yoruba’s sacred groves, the Igbos ancestral shrines, and the animist cosmologies of the Tiv,

Esan, Urhobo and Efik, what is not seen is that nature is not separate from culture but a vital, sacred presence within it. These various ontologies take shape as disparate visual vocabularies such as motifs, ritual symbols, materials, icons, and so on; none of which are mere aesthetic expressions but rather eco-ethical archives. For many indigenous works of art, rivers, trees, and animals are not merely decorative symbols but living spirits, or even gods. For example, typical masquerade outfits may include raffia and feathers, as well as pigments made from indigenous plants, suggesting environmental embeddedness and spiritual devotion to the land. In these guises, art becomes an almost sensory appendage of ecological awareness, carrying over values of equilibrium, consideration, and the perpetuation of species across generations.

However, it is this spiritual coherence and eco-aesthetic fluency that have been fractured by colonially created legacies of disjunctive land practices, extractive aesthetics, and unruffled heritage practices. Territorial and epistemological Western-imposed boundaries like these frequently fragment the pre-existing indigenous relationship between land, spirit, and art, favouring object over ritual and aesthetics over function (Chirikure et al., 2015). However, amid these fractures, Nigerian visual arts are performing rites of repair and reclamation. These artists have begun reknitting fragmented cosmologies into new configurations indicative of long-lasting communal attitudes about stewardship of land, history, and ancestral lineages. Among many cultures, there is a shared belief that the land remembers - that it keeps the ancestors' footprints and needs ritual renewal through art, whether through performance, visual, or folklore/storytelling/oral communication. These overlapping values can be seen as synergistic structures upon which eco-artists embroider, and weavers tear down the dominant environmental models, proposing instead a vision of art's sustainability that is deeply relational and spirit-situated, body-based, and culturally embodied.

Western Environmental Frameworks in Eco-Environmentalism

Western environmentalism, such as that institutionalised through global organisations like UNESCO, often comes from an Enlightenment tradition that regards nature as external to human culture, as something that might be studied, managed, and preserved in accordance with scientific rationalism. This frame values objective measurement and policy devices, such as carbon metrics, reserve zones, and ecological limits (among the many dimensions of reductionism). Despite serving to contribute to key global agreements, however, UNESCO simultaneously reinforces a dichotomous perspective in which humans are somehow disconnected from (rather than of) 'nature'; heritage is either immaterial (e.g., intangible traditions) or material (monuments, landscapes), but rarely is an emergent relational and evolving ecology of culture and being recognised (Arias, 2024). In various parts of Africa, especially Nigeria, this imported framework is far from representative of local ontologies, where values of the environment are not fixed or functional but symbolic, sacred, and embedded in way of life, memory, and artistic creativity.

This investigation situates Nigerian visual artists as interveners and critics of these dominant paradigms. Their work resists the reduction of nature to data or of heritage to dead things, highlighting an embodied and affective environmentalism. In Onuzulike's ceramic artistry, for instance, the recollection of environmental devastation is invoked to give material form to a

mourning rooted in Igbo cosmology; he makes residue into witness. Dalong's riff on industrial tyres as sculptural objects addresses the violence of post-industrial waste, anchoring international discussions on pollution and overconsumption in an understanding of community and context. These are not artists who want art to “go green” in the mode of sustainable-practice compliance, but artists who re-situate matter as an agent and cultural knowledge as an ecological technology. In the process, they reject Western eco-discourses that frequently come off as extractive of knowledge; valuing “green innovation” and negating other knowledgeable traditions that have long practised resource respect and land ethics.

This tension here is not just about aesthetics; it is also epistemological and political (Muscat, 2020; Nye, 2008). Historically, UNESCO's frameworks have aligned with preservationist models of heritage as static, universal, and in need of conservation, often through mandates or top-down programming. Nevertheless, this study shows that Nigerian heritage, especially as enacted through visual arts practice, is profoundly processual, relational, and enmeshed in the living systems of meaning within the cultural background in which it is represented. Painting ritual of the Osogbo Art Movement, for example, creates what one might call a sacred ecology; one which cannot be separated from communal activities, seasonal cycles, or ethical imperatives. Looking at such heritage in museum categories, static conservation strategies may cut it off from the cultural and ecological lifeworlds that sustain it. This form of visual art is a way of resisting and reactivating, but not a dismantling of planetary scales, but by a force of their conversion against other epistemes.

In this context, the current study not only acknowledges Western environmental knowledge and theory but also advocates for its decentering and pluralisation. It fits with decolonial work that demands epistemic justice in conversations about sustainability and insists on the relevance of locally embedded, culturally legible models of environmental stewardship (Aries, 2024; Karmakar & Chetty, 2023; Fricker, 2007). Viewed through the traditional lens of the visual arts, Nigerian artists have contributed to this (re)imagination by demystifying the idea that environmentalism can be poetic, spiritual, feminist, and ancestral. Their practices are not just mirroring environmental realities but also intervening, enacting, and translating them across scales. So the critique of Western eco-environmentalism is not disavowing but interventional, asserting that systems such as those propagated by UNESCO must become living, dialogic, situated, culturally formed, and responsive not only to the climate crisis and its manifold impacts but also to the diversity of human values, memories, and forms of care for the environment.

Research Methods

This research adopts an exploratory, descriptive and arts-based research design to demonstrate how Nigerian visual artists contribute to re-engineering UNESCO World Heritage through eco-cultural practices steeped in indigenous values. The study follows a multilocative case study procedure that examines certain artists as cases addressing environmental ethics, material agency, and cultural heritage. Key sources include visual and material readings of works of art, focusing on clay (ceramics/pottery), sculpture, textiles, graphic design, and ritual paintings in particular, as well as observation at heritage-oriented exhibitions, festivals, and sacred sites,

such as the Osun-Osogbo Grove. The selection of cases is based on thematic and cultural specificity, and on the existence of symbolic or ecological interventions in the artists' work. The study is approached through a reflexive and decolonial methodological ethic that prioritises indigenous epistemologies, both in the interpretation of the site and in the analytical framing. Data interpretation is conducted through thematic coding, particularly with attention to material symbolism, spatial context, and visual storytelling.

Ethical and Reflexive Practices

This analysis is informed by ethical and reflexive goals that emphasise respect for community systems of knowledge, cultural protocols and indigenous frames of mind. Given how artistic and ecological practices are bound to the spiritual, ancestral, and community-based life ways of interlocutors, the research resists extractive or perspective-seeking methodologies. Rather, it operates from an ethic of care and relationality, allowing indigenous values and readings to inform interpretations of meaning rather than being subsumed by academic frameworks. This involves critical reflexivity, i.e., the researcher's awareness of his/her positionality, privileges, and epistemic location, particularly when interpreting artworks shaped by cultural cosmologies and ritual or religious contexts. By having artists, cultural practitioners, and sacred places become co-authors of knowledge, the work follows decolonial principles and promotes a more just and pluralistic heritage and environmental scholarship.

Case Studies and Thematic Coding

Theme 1: Material Activism & Environmental Memory

◆ Ozioma Onuzulike (Nigerian ceramicist, academic and cultural theorist - University of Nigeria, Nsukka). The ceramic installations of Onuzulike reconceptualise material ecologies, conjuring waste as poetic storage for cultural and environmental trauma. In his widely acclaimed "*Seed Yams of Our Land series*" (2019), Onuzulike presents yam seed tubers embedded with sacred symbols in Igbo cosmology, crafted in clay and displayed in barn-like configurations, embodying the fragility of hope within exploitative contexts (Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos 2019). These materials conjure the history of colonial extraction and postcolonial environmental neglect, particularly in the oil-rich yet ruined Niger Delta. His textured reliefs in shades of grey (from dark spots to light surfaces) and roughness bind the surface with a sense of touch, creating an archive of forensic memory that recalls indigenous systems of knowledge, in which seeds are not just objects of fertility but also of resistance and continuity. Through his activation of the spiritual afterlife of deforestation and capitalist accumulation, Onuzulike's ceramics therefore perform material activism by recasting bodily and waste materials into novel eco-political terms. His combination of Nsukka school aesthetics and environmental philosophy is seen to establish him as a leading figure in the discourse on ecocriticism and art in Nigeria.



Figure 1. Ozioma Onuzulike, *We are like yam seedlings*
in a burnt barn, 2019, 155 x 230 x 12 cm
Carbonised terracotta, burnt wood and mild steel,
<https://ko-artspace.com/artists/51-oziuma-onuzulike/>



Figure 2. Ozioma Onuzulike, *Yam Bodies: Dry Season II*,
2019, Terracotta (iron-saturated stoneware clay body),
mild steel, copper-coated aluminium wire and wood,
113 x 171 x 16 cm (variable installation).
<https://ko-artspace.com/artists/51-oziuma-onuzulike/>

❖ Peter Fanwgle Dalong (Nigerian sculptor, painter and installation artist living in Nassarawa and Asaba) has created a winning practice of twirling condemned tyres and plastic cans into decorative sculptures, with which he criticises a culture of waste and environmental neglect. In the new installation *Race Against Time* (2022), built using nothing but waste plastic cans, we find a tortoise, a hare and a crocodile: three animals which, between them, stage a meditation on speed, endurance and lurking danger. The old tortoise-and-hare storyline is transplanted here, with the crocodile as a predator metaphor for the cutting edge and its implications. Made of non-biodegradable plastic, this anti-monumental work dramatises the paradox of time. As habits of waste decay and renewal shape ecosystems, human-made debris leaves its own unholy residue, endangering life.

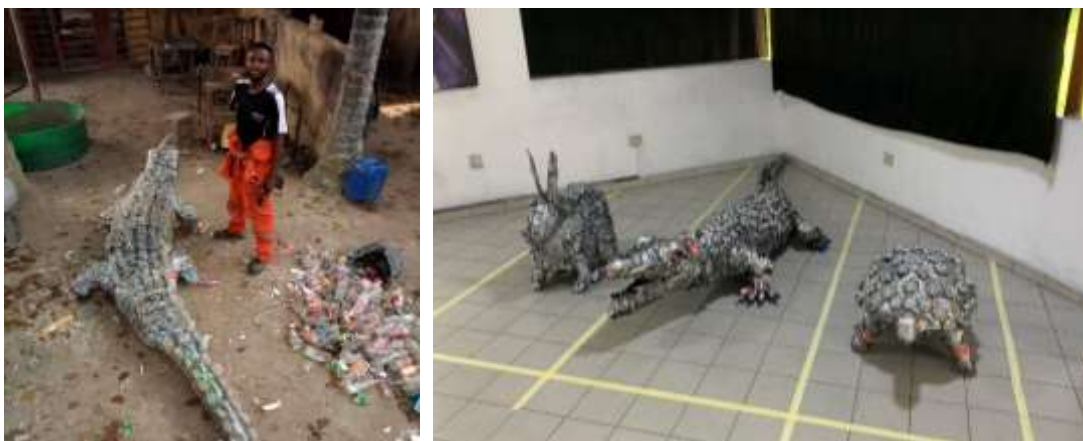


Figure 3. (a & b). Peter Fanwgle Dalong, *Race against Time*, 2022, 91.44 x 365.76 cm (varied-sized installation), Life in my city art festival (LIMCAF), Enugu, Nigeria.

Not so much an image as a static allegory, the sculptural triad is a visual hinge for eco-environmental thought. It reveals the rift between the industrial temporality of extractivism, disposability, and acceleration, and the indigenous ecological values of endurance, balance, and cyclical renewal. This tension reverberates through the call to revitalise UNESCO-recognised heritage practices, which embody sustainable cosmologies. In Nigerian traditional arts, animal symbolism frequently imparts lessons in living in harmony with nature. Dalong's representation of the tortoise, hare, and crocodile revives this legacy in modern language and points a finger at the fossil-fueled capitalism that intervenes in natural interrelations. By turning trash into a cultural metaphor, Dalong not only comments on environmental ruination, but he also shows how indigenous-inflected creativity might guide eco-activism in the present day. It is the case that his work is more than a mere artwork: it is an axis of theorising sustainable futures by recombining indigenous values with concern for the global environment.

Theme 2: Spiritual Eco-aesthetics & Ancestral Symbolism

◆ Nike Davies-Okundaye's (Textile Artist / Educator and Cultural Financier; Owner, Nike Art Gallery Nigeria) textile art revivifies and reinvigorates Yoruba cosmological aesthetics in celebration of cultural continuity and environmental ritual. Her adire (indigo dyeing) is not only a technical ode to the Yoruba ancestors, but also an eco-spiritual homage to natural resources and nature's offerings, and a peaceful act of activism for the preservation of endangered materials and methods. Davies-Okundaye has long promoted the re-engagement of youth and women with traditional ecological knowledge and the symbolism of water deities (such as Osun) and fertility spirits, which is often woven into her fabrics. The motif of water, found throughout her indigo-dyed works, evokes the holy rivers of Yoruba cosmology and indicates the reciprocal relationship between ecology and divinity (Ajibade, 2021; Mwendwa, 2019). Through choreographic workshops and transgenerational teaching, she transmits not just technique but also a spiritual worldview in which land, ancestors and material are interconnected. In doing so, her work operates as an eco-pagan in cloth, converting and containing spiritual geography into an image-borne inheritance.



Figure 4. Nike Davies-Okundaye, *The story of the hunter*, 1967, Appliqué on fabric,



Figure 5. Nike, *Osun, the goddess of water*, 1987, batik and natural dyes.

34 x 39 in (86.4 x 99.1 cm).

<https://blog.fabrics-store.com/wp-content/uploads/>

<https://ko-artspace.com/art-fairs/32/works/artworks-608->

◆ Osogbo Art Movement (comprises a group of artists associated with the Osun-Osogbo sacred grove, most notably Twins Seven Seven, Jimoh Buraimoh, and Susanne Wenger). The Osogbo Art Movement, a tradition born in the sacred city of Osogbo, represents a blend of ritual ecology, visual mysticism, and autochthonous spirituality (Weise, 2017). The Osun-Osogbo festival is rooted in this reverence, developed in the 1960s under the guidance of Austrian-Nigerian priestess and artist Susanne Wenger, who created an artistic link to animals as silhouettes of mystical practices in the sacred grove. Using techniques such as batik, painting, and bead mosaic, artists like Twins Seven Seven and Jimoh Buraimoh turned mythic stories of deities, forest spirits, and ancestral guardians into material artefacts. The Osogbo art was never merely decorative; it was a form of participation in a ritual that would help renew the grove, both physically and symbolically. This investment chimes with eco-aesthetic values in which the sanctity of the environment requires sacred respect rather than technocratic intervention (O'tshemaye, 2024). The Osogbo School sees art as a spiritual intermediary between threatened natural places and the communities that revere them.



Figure 6. Taiwo Olaniyi Oyewale-Toyeje Oyelale Osuntoki (Twin 7-7), 1977, *Masked Hunter Captured Father of Beasts*, Oil on Board, 122 x 244 cm, National Gallery of Modern Art, Lagos.

◆ Victor O. Onibere (Art Historian, Visual Artist, and Academia - Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria) emerges from art-historical and visual-art perspectives as a practitioner who operates at the juncture between Yoruba cosmology and contemporary environmental discourses, practising the renewal of Nigerian arts of the past. His work practices an eco-spirit aesthetic that blends ancestral spiritual symbols with modern visual forms, humanising eco-environmentalism by operating within the UNESCO heritage revival structure. Onibere's most acclaimed digital painting, *Cosmic Genesis: Obatala's Creation (2023)*, is the centrepiece of this oeuvre, showing sky deities, the hooded one, Obatala, god the Father, creating man below, where cosmic wheels of harmony and balance circulate him. When Yoruba myths are set against global symbols such as the Vitruvian Man, this could be seen as a daring syncretism that locates indigenous spiritual consciousness within the universal.

Onibere's method builds on broader trends in African art and is inspired by the recycling of ancestral forms to honour cultural and environmental values. His intellectual forbearers range from Dada Areogun's narrative woodcarving, which curates cultural memory and ecological sensitivity. Similarly, the Mbari practice of the Igbo reveals how visual material forms and ritual place engage with the eco-spiritual unity of Ala (the earth goddess) – (Anyokwu, 2008). Another version of the same phenomenon is Anyanwu, which can be viewed as Ben Enwonwu's iconic sculpture of the Igbo earth goddess, Ani, a fusion of autochthonous imagery and modernist idioms that articulates national renewal and spiritual ecology (Rotinwa, 2021). Within this framework, Onibere becomes an extension in the spatial-eco tradition of Yoruba culture - particularly the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage site - in which animistic art and sculptural gateways mediate cosmological ecology in the face of urban development. These landscapes (environmental-aesthetic) are of sacred spaces that perpetuate ancestral geographies in the present.



Figure 7. Victor O. Onibere, *Cosmic Genesis: Obatala's Creation*, 2023, Digital Art, 60.96 x 91.44cm, Bruce Onobrakpoye Art Gallery, Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria.

Onibere shares a theogic/theurgic framework with other popular studies on indigenous environmental ethics, including Ifá's teaching on environmental stewardship and the sanctimonious role of Igbo sacrifice and eco-spirituality in the discourses on sustainable development. Such sources advocate a model in which indigenous cosmologies are strong ecologies of practice underpinning sound environmental management and cultural continuity. In weaving together these threads, Onibere becomes a leading voice in a generation of artist-thinkers who apply spiritual eco-aesthetics to stitch together spiritual-intangible cultural ecosystems back into heritage narratives of global culture. His digital canvases serve as eco-archives and visual inheritances that refute the anonymisation of ecological disaster, reminding

us of the perpetuation of ancestral wisdom in contemporary artistic forms. Onibere's scholarly research and artistic practice, which are informed by art historical discourse and postcolonial theory, conceptualise visual practice as decolonial activism and the recovery of identity. He critiques value divergence among indigenous peoples, in which modernity supplants ancestral epistemologies, and art practices serve as a channel for spiritual environmentalism. With curatorial lectures, creative workshops, and pedagogical mentorship, Onibere draws on a historical cultural renaissance similar to Nike Davies-Okundaye's hands-on work in education. However, his medium is digital painting and theoretical scholarship.

Theme 3: Feminist Futures & Mythic Environmentalism

◆ Peju Alatise (Multidisciplinary artist, architect, writer and founder, ANAI foundation - dedicated to the nurturing of emerging African artists) art practice consists of a potent consolidation of feminist inquiry, Yoruba mythology, and environmental critique that solidifies her as one of the most visionary proponents of Nigerian eco-art. Through spanning sculpture, installation and literature, she builds webs of mythical terrains populated by young female protagonists who frequently float, fly or are hybrid creatures. In her acclaimed installation *'Flying Girls'* (2017), which was exhibited in Venice Biennale (Obuobi, 2017), she presents a series of large flying girls with black skin, situated amongst a dreamscape of recycled metal and locally sourced pigments. In this sense, the work offers a radical critique of the oppression of the girl child, envisaging a world where freedom, flight, and connection to nature are spiritually encoded entitlements. The elements she works with – such as re-formed cloth, earth and metal – are not impermanent materials, but part of a recycling aesthetics that hails resilience, agency and ecological consciousness.



Figure 8. Peju Alatise, *Flying Girls*, 2027, 157 × 157 × 110 in (per sculpture), metal, fibreglass, plaster of Paris, resins, cellulose, black matte paint. Nigerian Pavilion, 57th Venice Biennale, 2017. Source: Peju Alatise – <https://share.google/DDQWRDjXF5wCwW3z9>

Lots of her works combine Yoruba oriki (praise poetry), ancestral myths and ritual signs with a futuristic voice that disrupts Western and patriarchal epistemology. Her installation becomes

an eco-mythological site in which personal wounds, communal memory and planetary attention are ritually intertwined. She frequently treats the land not as a mere backdrop, but as a living repository of gendered spiritual struggle into which female bodies are inextricably folded with the humus of earth, ancestry and survival. By combining speculative fiction and sacred visual language, Alatise offers what this study calls “feminist eco-visioning”—an imaginative approach to addressing environmental and sociopolitical collapse by drawing on indigenous cosmologies to resist and rejuvenate. Her work constitutes an act of interpretation, as she brings back mythical awareness not to remember, but for the future.

Cross-case Analysis

The artists featured are varied in media and approach, but are united in a mission to resurrect cultural memory, ecological awareness, and indigenous worldview in peril through material and spiritual conversation with the environment. Their practices embody an understanding of heritage that goes beyond a static model of conservation, activating it as a living, sensuous body that extends from the past into the present. UNESCO’s 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage defines heritage as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills; criteria these artists meet, not despite but because of creative transformation. Onuzulike and Dalong suggest the different ways that material waste - palm kernel seed pod, waste tyre - can be reimagined as ecological witness and resistance. Their material activism compels the reuse of organic and inorganic materials in mixed-media installations that express and symbolise humans’ relationship to struggles with the planet, embracing the United Nations’ broader mandate for sustainability in art by applying aesthetic effort to environmental advocacy and storytelling. Through materials that represent both cultural history and ecological transgression, they make visible ecological trauma and suggest symbolic routes toward healing.

At the same time, artists operating in the Spiritual Eco-aesthetic group, including Nike Davies-Okundaye, the Osogbo Movement, and Victor Onibere, emphasise ritual ecology and ancestral caretaking as central to the Nigerian environmental imagination. Onibere’s work suggests that indigenous cosmologies harbour lightly read ecological epistemologies that are occluded by modernisation, and his digital painting *Cosmic Genesis: Obatala’s Creation* (2023) makes this argument visual by reinterpreting Yoruba creation myths as an ecological plenum for all. Art for him is not merely representation; it is a kind of eco-archive, a living storehouse where ancestral wisdom and contemporary disaster converge. His consideration draws on UNESCO’s idea of cultural landscapes, zones of heritage formed by human adaptation of the natural world. Onibere extends the argument to suggest that we should also think of intangible, mythic knowledge and spiritual eco-aesthetics as part of heritage. The Osun Sacred Grove, dynamically regenerated by Osogbo artists, stands out as a concrete realisation of this vision; however, Onibere has shown that this eco-spiritual landscape can also be reimagined in digital form, connecting ritual traditions with contemporary modes of cultural production and research.

Alatise’s contribution to the third thematic node is a feminist speculative take on heritage, contemplating Afrocentric futures of myth and gendered environmental ethics. Her

installations, populated by winged girls and ancestral figures, do not just maintain the past; they envision it as the future. This idea is in tune with UNESCO's recent focus on intergenerational transmission and gender equity in cultural protection. In dialogue with Alatise's futurist feminism, Onibere's eco-spiritualism challenges the idea of tradition as fixed, arguing that it can equally serve as a conduit linking spiritual continuity with futuristic imaginings. While Alatise reclaims agency of the female body as the portal to keepers of ecological renewal, Onibere condemns the broader eradication of indigenous epistemologies, arguing that human and environmental renewal is not conceivable without the cultural and spiritual systems that support them. Together, these artists are testing UNESCO's national and global heritage frameworks to move beyond static models of preservation toward an eco-humanising, participatory, and spiritually entangled notion of heritage. Their work illustrates that environmental resurgence is not just technical or policy-oriented but an aesthetic culture emotionally grounded in indigenous ethics and artistic imagination. As such, Nigerian visual arts become a critical terrain for revivifying UNESCO heritage, not as a static artefact but as vibrant, embodied practices of artistic resistance, healing ritual, and ecological remaking.

Reviving UNESCO World Heritage through Visual Arts

Traditional UNESCO World Heritage schemes have tended to favour material monuments and immaterial customs in a preservationist mode, relatively more remote from local epistemologies and from contemporary creative processes. This chasm is further highlighted in spaces such as Nigeria, where cultural heritage is lived, performed, and reinterpreted dynamically through artistic engagements with everyday life. Visual provides ways of reconceptualising heritage not as a collection of artefacts or customs, but as a territorially located ecological practice, effected through artists' mediation of land, material, and memory (Ugwuanyi et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2020; Gravesend, 2012). Visual art also serves as a medium for transmitting indigenous ecological knowledge from one generation to the next, particularly when oral histories, spiritual cosmologies, and traditional crafts are threatened by globalisation and extractive economies (UNESCO, 2003). As such, artists work within and beyond the categories and taxonomy shown to us by UNESCO, recalling heritage as a changing system of cultural vitality and environmental ethics.

Through the creation of such visual artworks, Nigerian artists can humanise eco-environmentalism by grounding abstractions such as climate in culturally specific experiences, stories and material engagements. For example, Onuzulike's ceramics are not just signs of stylistic developments but marked with eco-sorrow and resistance - transforming something that is wasted into something that shows a hand-trace of both deforestation and endurance. Similarly, Dalong's sculptural adaptations of waste tyres serve as environmental commentaries on post-industrial Nigeria, where pollution and mobility intersect with class, labour, and land use. These sets of practices do more than raise awareness; they frame affective and symbolic vocabularies of environmental grief, renewal and attachment. In the process, these artists decenter technocratic narratives, offering alternative, relationist, embodied, and culturally grounded approaches to sustainability. By employing ancestral materials, motifs and performance, there is a relational environmentalism, woven into indigenous ontologies, an argument for climate politics as historically contingent and cultural plurality.

Ultimately, these works of art highlight the epistemic agency of artists in the rearranging of heritage and environmental discourse. It does not treat artists as illustrators of ecological subjects, but rather, as theorists of eco-cultural continuity whose writing and making contest dominant conceptions of heritage preservation and green activism. Their artistic practices illustrate that to bring UNESCO World Heritage truly back to life, we need to attend to divergent value systems, symbolic languages, and ritual-material ecologies that condition meaning and memory into reality. Since artists are mediators between formal institutions and local worlds, they not only provide visual alternatives but also offer ontological critiques of what counts as heritage, whose environments are preserved, and how ecological futures are imagined. By doing so, they stretch the horizons of UNESCO's mission and open the door to a reconceptualisation of its mission from preservation to participatory regeneration, grounded in cultural sovereignty, artistic autonomy, and environmental justice.

Conclusion

This paper explored the impact of Nigerian visual artists on enhancing the revitalisation of UNESCO World Heritage through art-based forms that are the centrepiece. Based on deep-rooted indigenous ecological values that question colonial preservation systems, and stand for humanised environmental awareness. Instead of viewing heritage as a static inventory of monuments, the selected artists engage with it as a generative, living process, evolving in tune with ancestral symbolism, material activism, and spiritual eco-aesthetics. Their contributions broaden the conversation about eco-environmentalism by situating climate matters within culturally inflected frameworks of understanding and aesthetic concerns. Working through a variety of media (ceramics, fabric, graphic design, installation, etc.), these artists function as cultural workers who not only conserve heritage but also regenerate cultural patrimony in ways that promote both environmental consciousness and cultural self-determination.

There are several implications of the findings. UNESCO and partner institutions need to first recognise and promote living visual artists as stakeholders in heritage revitalisation, particularly those practising within indigenous epistemologies, and to use sustainable materials. Such models are essential at the beginning of the 21st century. They must be reoriented to new policies of cultural democratisation and participation with artistic mediation, ritual knowledge, and the community interpretation of a legacy. Also, arts and culture education curricula and heritage studies in Nigeria should incorporate eco-aesthetic approaches informed by indigenous practices to help young artists anchor their work in the concerns of environmental ethics and spiritual memory. Furthermore, heritage preservation efforts must go beyond technocratic conservation; instead, they should embrace materiality and symbolism as resonant artistic interventions that are sensitive to the land's ecologies and cultures. Finally, there is an urgent need to set up forums for dialogue between artists, environmental researchers, and cultural policymakers in which conflicting indigenous forms of value are not blended down into a pasture of consensus but keep their ideas in productive tension. Art should not be considered a peripheral but a central aspect of the work of cultural rejuvenation and environmental justice. In drawing attention to the agency of artists such as Onuzulike, Onibere, Alatisé, and others, this study advocates for a reimagining of heritage as a cultural ecology and visionary act, a form that conjuncts memory, material, and imagination for the service of planetary and ancestral futures.

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