

THE IMPACT OF TOURISM ON CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Chinaza Ohakwe

A Master's Level Academic Article in Cultural Studies
Department of Igbo, African & Communication Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Abstract

Tourism has emerged as one of the most transformative forces in the modern world, reshaping not only economies but also the cultural landscapes of societies across the globe. As international tourist arrivals recovered to approximately 91 percent of pre-pandemic figures by the third quarter of 2023 (UNWTO, 2023), the relationship between tourism and cultural preservation has become a matter of profound and urgent significance. This article provides a comprehensive, critical, and multidimensional examination of that relationship, drawing on contemporary scholarly literature, empirical case studies, and international policy frameworks. The analysis explores tourism's dual role: as a vehicle for revitalising tangible and intangible heritage, generating economic incentives for conservation, and fostering cross-cultural understanding; and simultaneously as a force capable of commodifying, eroding, and displacing the very cultures it claims to celebrate. Emerging frameworks of sustainable tourism, community-based tourism (CBT), regenerative tourism,

and digital heritage technologies are examined as means of reconciling tourism's economic imperatives with the preservation imperative. The article concludes that tourism, when governed with cultural sensitivity, community agency, and institutional rigour, can be a powerful instrument of cultural preservation.

Keywords: cultural preservation, heritage tourism, sustainable tourism, cultural commodification, community-based tourism, over tourism, intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO.

Introduction

Culture constitutes the living memory of humanity — encompassing accumulated knowledge, beliefs, arts, customs, and transmitted values that define how communities understand themselves and their place in the world. Cultural heritage, both tangible (monuments, artifacts, architectural sites) and intangible (oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, traditional craftsmanship), form the irreplaceable foundation of human civilisation. Its preservation is not merely an aesthetic concern but a profound ethical and political imperative.

Tourism occupies a deeply ambivalent position in relation to this imperative. It can generate the economic resources, global visibility, and institutional attention that heritage sites and traditional communities require to survive in the modern world, while simultaneously enabling the commodification, physical degradation, and

cultural displacement that pose existential threats to the very heritage that draws visitors. This paradox — that tourism can simultaneously preserve and destroy culture — lies at the heart of this article. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily suspended global travel and, in doing so, illuminated this contradiction: research in the Cook Islands found that indigenous communities experienced a resurgence of authentic cultural practice in the absence of tourists, raising profound questions about the relationship between tourism, authenticity, and cultural agency (Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism, 2024).

This article is organised to address the topic systematically. Following a theoretical framework, it examines the positive and negative impacts of tourism on cultural preservation, reviews sustainable and regenerative tourism frameworks, considers the role of digital technologies, analyses policy responses, and presents regional case study evidence before concluding with recommendations for policy and practice.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Cultural heritage is broadly defined by UNESCO (2003) to encompass both intangible heritage — oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, and traditional craftsmanship — and tangible heritage including movable artifacts, immovable monuments, and archaeological sites. In cultural studies, heritage is understood not as a static repository of the past but as an active, contested, and politically charged process of selection, interpretation, and representation (Smith, 2006, as cited in Flyen et al., 2023). Tourism intervenes

in this process by shaping which aspects of culture are rendered visible, legible, and marketable to outsiders.

Cultural commodification — the transformation of cultural practices, artifacts, and identities into marketable products for tourist consumption — is the central analytical concept through which scholars assess tourism's cultural impact. Cohen (2020) identifies a spectrum along which this occurs, from benign commercialisation that retains cultural authenticity to wholesale distortion in which practices are redesigned entirely as spectacles for tourist consumption. Closely related is Urry's (1990) concept of the 'tourist gaze,' which describes how tourism structures the perception of places and cultures, creating demand for exotic, authentic 'otherness' that the act of mass tourism ironically tends to destroy. Devkota et al. (2020) demonstrate how intensive tourist culture can drive westernisation in host communities, fundamentally altering social norms, while Fan et al. (2020) document the dilemma facing indigenous groups who must choose between culturally erosive engagement with tourism and economically costly rejection of it. The normative framework of sustainable development — particularly UN SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) — provides the policy context within which these tensions are addressed internationally.

Positive Impacts of Tourism On Cultural Preservation

Economic Incentives for Heritage Conservation

Tourism's most immediate positive contribution to cultural preservation is the economic revenue it generates for heritage sites and institutions. When appropriately managed, tourism creates a compelling economic rationale for preserving cultural heritage that might otherwise be demolished or left to decay under development pressure. UNESCO's World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme explicitly integrates heritage conservation with tourism planning, directing tourism revenues into restoration and maintenance (UNESCO, 2021). The designation of UNESCO World Heritage Sites — expanded in 2023 to 1,199 properties across 168 countries — reliably generates significant increases in international visitation, channeling funding towards conservation (Grand View Research, 2024).

Revitalisation of Intangible Heritage and Community Empowerment

Tourism can also revitalise intangible cultural heritage by creating economic demand and social recognition for traditional music, dance, cuisine, craftsmanship, and ceremonial practices. Research by Kostopoulou et al. (2021) on Silk Road heritage branding demonstrates how tourism narratives can rescue neglected regional heritage by positioning it as a premium product. In China, the coupling coordination between intangible cultural heritage and tourism development showed a sustained positive trend over the decade to 2022, suggesting that policy-enabled integration can support simultaneous advances in both domains (Nature, 2024). Community-based approaches amplify these benefits: research by Kim et al. (2023) demonstrates that community-

developed tourism strengthens social cohesion and cultural identity, while UNESCO's micro-grants programme in Cameroon — awarding \$40,000 to support 160 community members in arts training, traditional knowledge transfer, and sustainable enterprise — provides a concrete model of tourism-driven cultural empowerment (UNESCO, 2024).

Cross-Cultural Understanding and Digital Preservation

Heritage tourism fosters cross-cultural empathy and serves important diplomatic functions, functioning as a bridge for intercultural exchange in inbound tourism (Yue, 2024). The growth of digital heritage technologies — VR, AR, and AI platforms — driven in part by tourism's commercial imperatives, has generated powerful new tools for documenting and disseminating cultural heritage. Science Direct (2025) identifies VR as playing a pivotal role in revolutionising cultural preservation by offering immersive experiences that reduce physical visitation pressure on fragile sites. In 2024, Tencent's virtual reconstruction of Beijing's Central Axis, coinciding with its UNESCO designation, demonstrated the potential of integrating digital heritage technology with formal conservation (Grand View Research, 2024)

Negative Impacts Of Tourism On Cultural Preservation

Cultural Commoditization and Loss of Authenticity

The commodification of culture for mass tourist consumption is among the most pervasive threats to

authentic cultural preservation. When cultural practices are repackaged as tourist attractions, they are frequently simplified, sanitised, or exoticised to meet tourist expectations, eroding the depth and meaning they hold for their originating communities. As Nurhadi et al. (2022) document in their study of the Osing community in Indonesia, this commodification involves an ethical transition in which original cultural meanings are displaced by commercial entertainment. Religious and sacred practices are especially vulnerable: research on indigenous communities in Chiang Mai, Thailand, illustrates how tourist demand can compel communities to reconstruct their ethnicity as palatably as possible for visitors, stripping ceremonies of their sacred character (Chai Lai Orchid, 2021). The souvenir industry compounds this problem: commercial pressures drive mass-manufactured copies of traditional craftsmanship that undermine living artisanal traditions while deceiving consumers into believing they are acquiring authentic cultural products (Sustainability, 2024).

Overtourism and Physical Degradation of Heritage

Overtourism — the overwhelming of destinations by visitor numbers that exceed their carrying capacity — causes direct physical damage to heritage sites through erosion, structural destabilisation, and pollution, and generates indirect harm through pressure on surrounding environments and communities. Flyen et al. (2023) demonstrate that even remote High Arctic heritage sites in Svalbard are not immune from tourist-driven degradation. In Bali, rapid international tourism growth has led to the erosion of traditional practices, the

commercialisation of sacred ceremonies, and the displacement of local communities, producing what researchers describe as a profound crisis of cultural identity (Acadlore, 2024). Overtourism also inflates housing costs, homogenises commercial environments, and disrupts the social fabric within which cultural traditions are sustained and transmitted.

Indigenous Displacement and the Demonstration Effect

Indigenous communities are disproportionately harmed by tourism's negative impacts. Tourism development frequently encroaches upon indigenous territories, disrupting traditional land use and severing the ecological relationships through which cultural identities are sustained. As Cultural Survival (2022) documents, tourism often encourages the exploitation of indigenous lands as tourist destinations in ways that ignore indigenous governance systems. The pandemic research from the Cook Islands, cited above, underscores how tourism can fundamentally alter the internal cultural dynamics of indigenous communities in ways that are difficult to reverse. Coleman (2021) advocates for frameworks grounded in the principle of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) to enable respectful and reciprocal engagement between indigenous communities and the tourism industry. Beyond indigenous communities, Devkota et al. (2020) identify the 'demonstration effect' — the adoption by local residents of tourists' behaviours and values — as a driver of cultural homogenisation that gradually replaces distinctive local cultures with globally standardised

tourist products. In the Global South, heritage-rich countries such as Nigeria face compound disadvantage: Old Oyo town exemplifies the advanced neglect of heritage resources when preservation investment, contingent on tourism revenues that have not materialised, is absent (Tandfonline, 2023). As of 2022, UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger contained 52 properties, with the greatest concentrations in Africa and the Middle East (UNESCO, 2022).

Sustainable, Community-Based, and Regenerative Tourism

Sustainable tourism — defined as tourism that addresses the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own needs — provides the primary normative framework within which the tourism–preservation tension is addressed. Rustini et al. (2022) emphasise that community involvement at every stage of tourism development is essential to sustainable outcomes, while Fatina et al. (2023) demonstrate that properly coordinated multi-stakeholder participation can deliver simultaneously positive economic, social, and cultural results, as evidenced in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia.

Community-based tourism (CBT) represents the most promising practical approach, giving communities control over how their cultural heritage is presented and monetised. Research by Lopez-Guzman et al. (2022) documents CBT's multiple benefits: strengthening social cohesion, empowering women and youth, and creating economic incentives for the continuation of traditional

practices. The Guna people of Panama's indigenous-led tourism governance system — codified in their Statute of Guna Tourism — provide a globally cited model of community-controlled cultural tourism. Research from Lithuania (MDPI, 2025) confirms that CBT initiatives effectively preserve cultural heritage and stimulate local economies, though funding gaps, regulatory barriers, and stakeholder conflicts require formal organisational structures to overcome.

Regenerative tourism goes further, aspiring to actively restore and renew the cultural and ecological systems it engages rather than merely minimising damage (Ateljevic, 2020). New Zealand's Tiaki Promise, a nationwide initiative engaging tourists, locals, operators, and government in the stewardship of Aotearoa's natural and cultural heritage, demonstrates regenerative principles at a national scale, promoting eco-friendly practices, supporting local artisans, and preserving traditional Māori practices (Carr & Slevitch, 2023). Carr and Slevitch (2023) argue that this regenerative paradigm requires a fundamental reorientation of tourism's relationship to culture: from extraction to stewardship, from consumption to creation.

Policy Frameworks and Institutional Responses

UNESCO's World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme (WH+ST) represent the most comprehensive international policy framework for the relationship between heritage tourism and cultural preservation. It integrates planning for tourism and heritage management at the destination level, ensuring that cultural assets are

valued and protected while appropriate tourism is developed. Its UNESCO Culture|2030 Indicators framework enables States Parties to monitor and report on the sustainability of tourism at World Heritage properties (UNESCO, 2025). The 46th session of the World Heritage Committee in New Delhi (2024) deepened this agenda by foregrounding indigenous rights and the principle of FPIC in heritage governance, reflecting a significant normative development in international heritage management (UNESCO, 2025).

At the national level, Fan (2022) documents how China's integration of culture and tourism as a strategic development objective has reshaped the tourism industry's development philosophy towards the protection and inheritance of local culture, with government investment in cultural and tourism bonds demonstrating positive driving effects on regional industry structures. In heritage-rich developing countries, effective policy must integrate conservation, community engagement, tourism development, and skills training in a coherent framework. The ICOMOS Charter for Cultural Tourism and the UNWTO's Tourism and Culture Synergies framework provide the overarching international normative environment within which national policies are situated.

Regional Case Study Evidence

Africa's cultural heritage tourism exemplifies both the potential and the challenges of the tourism–preservation relationship. Cameroon's UNESCO micro-grants programme demonstrates that community-centred,

institutionally supported approaches can catalyse authentic cultural tourism development in resource-constrained environments (UNESCO, 2024), while Nigeria's Old Oyo town illustrates the devastating consequences of heritage neglect when preservation investment fails to materialise (Tandfonline, 2023).

In Asia, China's managed integration of intangible cultural heritage and tourism development has yielded sustained positive results at the provincial level (Nature, 2024), contrasting sharply with Bali's experience of cultural crisis driven by unmanaged mass tourism (Acadlore, 2024). The Pacific offers instructive indigenous case studies in both directions: the Cook Islands' pandemic-era research documents tourism's erosive effects on cultural agency (Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism, 2024), while New Zealand's Tiaki Promise and the Guna people of Panama demonstrate that indigenous communities can exercise meaningful cultural agency within the tourism system when provided with adequate legal protections and institutional support.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has argued that tourism is inherently neither preservative nor inherently destructive of cultural heritage: its impact depends entirely on the governance structures within which it operates, the degree of community agency it enables, and the normative frameworks that guide its development. When tourism generates sustainable economic incentives for heritage maintenance, revitalises intangible practices through

demand and recognition, empowers communities to manage their own cultural resources, and operates within robust institutional frameworks, it can be a powerful preservation force. When it commodifies culture for mass consumption, overwhelms heritage sites through over tourism, displaces indigenous communities, or drives cultural homogenisation through the demonstration effect, it becomes a force of destruction.

The following recommendations are grounded in the evidence reviewed. First, community-centred governance — with FPIC systematically applied in all contexts involving indigenous communities — must be placed at the heart of cultural heritage tourism policy. Second, scientifically assessed carrying capacity limits must be rigorously enforced at heritage sites using digital visitor management tools and visitor dispersal strategies. Third, the economic benefits of heritage tourism must be equitably distributed through regulatory frameworks that prioritise local employment and reinvestment of revenues in community welfare and cultural preservation. Fourth, investment in VR, AR, and AI-powered digital heritage technologies must be significantly expanded as tools of cultural documentation and immersive heritage experience. Fifth, regenerative tourism principles should be systematically integrated into heritage governance at national and international levels, moving beyond harm minimisation to active cultural revitalisation. Sixth, UNESCO and the UNWTO must strengthen support for heritage management capacity in the Global South, where the gap between

cultural heritage abundance and institutional preservation capacity is most acute.

Future research should pursue longitudinal study of digital heritage technologies' long-term impacts on physical visitation and authenticity; comparative empirical analysis of governance structures and heritage outcomes across cultural contexts; and the scalability of CBT without loss of community-centred character. Most critically, future scholarship must prioritise the epistemological contributions of indigenous communities and Global South cultures that have historically been marginalized in both academic research and international policy debates. The imperative to develop tourism models that actively support cultural preservation, rather than undermine it, has never been more urgent.

References

- Ateljevic, I. (2020). Transforming the (tourism) world for good and (re)generating the potential of tourism. *Tourism Geographies*, 22(3), 467–475. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.20201759134>
- Carr, A., & Slevitch, L. (2023). The regenerative turn: Beyond sustainability in tourism research and practice. *Tourism Management*, 94, 104664. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104664>
- Chai Lai Orchid. (2021, June 1). The impact of tourism on indigenous communities in Thailand. <https://chailaiorchid.com/blog/the-impact-of-tourism-on-indigenous-communities-in-thailand-2/>

- Cohen, S. (2020). Digital media and the commodification of culture. *Tourism and Cultural Change*, 17(2), 127–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2020.1735200>
- Coleman, E. (2021). Indigenous tourism and cultural appropriation: Towards a respectful engagement. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 89, 103086. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals2021.103086>
- Cultural Survival. (2022). The impact of tourism on indigenous communities. <https://www.Culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/impact-tourism-indigenous-communities>
- Devkota, N., Paudel, U., & Bhandari, U. (2020). Does westernization influence the business culture of a touristic city? *Economics and Sociology*, 13(4), 154–172. <https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789X.2020/13-4/10>
- Fan, K. H. F., Chang, T. C., & Ng, S. L. (2020). The Batek's dilemma on indigenous tourism. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 83, 102948. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2020.102948>
- Fan, Y. (2022). Evolution of cultural tourism policy in China. *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, 20(3), 341–358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14766825.2021.1989300>
- Fatina, R., Hakim, L., & Suharto, R. (2023). Multi-stakeholder participation in sustainable tourism management: A case study from Labuan Bajo, Indonesia. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 31(4), 810–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2022.2119000>

- Flyen, A. C., Flyen, C., & Hegnes, A. W. (2023). Exploring vulnerability indicators: Tourist impact on cultural heritage sites in High Arctic Svalbard. *Heritage*, 6(12), 7706–7726. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage6120405>
- Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism. (2024). What happens when tourism is turned off: Exploring the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions for Indigenous people in Rarotonga, the Cook Islands. *Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism*, 3, 1425865. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsut.2024.1425865>
- Grand View Research. (2024). Cultural tourism market size, share & trends analysis report. <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/cultural-tourism-market-report>
- Kim, K., Uysal, M., & Sirgy, M. J. (2023). Community-developed tourism and cultural identity: An empirical examination. *Tourism Management*, 95, 104690. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2022.104690>
- Kostopoulou, S., Sofianou, P. K., & Tsiokanos, K. (2021). Silk road heritage branding and polycentric tourism development. *Sustainability*, 13(4), 1893. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13041893>
- Lopez-Guzman, T., Arcila-Garrido, M., & Oliver, J. L. T. (2022). Community-based tourism and sustainable development: A review of literature. *Sustainability*, 14(19), 12219. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su141912219>

- MDPI. (2025). Heritage management models for community-based cultural tourism in Lithuania. *Heritage*, 8(1), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.3390/heritage8010031>
- Nature/npj Heritage Science. (2024). Interactive effects of intangible cultural heritage and tourism development: A study based on the data panel PVAR model and coupled coordination model. *npj Heritage Science*, 12, 1502. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s40494-024-01502-z>
- Nurhadi, I., Sumarti, T., Hadi Dharmawan, A., & Damanhuri, D. S. (2022). Cultural commodification and ethical transition of tourism development: A case in Osing community, Indonesia. *Sodality: Jurnal Sosiologi Pedesaan*, 10(1), 24–43. <https://doi.org/10.22500/10202238564>
- Rustini, H. A., Rai Utama, I. G. B., & Sujana, I. K. (2022). Community involvement in sustainable cultural heritage tourism. *International Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Management*, 5(1), 59–74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.103059>
- Science Direct (2024). The effect of cultural system reform on tourism development: Evidence from China. *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics*, 70, 302–318. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.strueco.2024.01.009>
- ScienceDirect. (2025). Exploring equitable opportunities and cultural preservation in smart tourism through sustainable and accessible virtual reality. *Journal of Smart Tourism*, 3(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.3051/jst.2025.000075>

- Sustainability. (2024). Souvenirs and local cultural development: A systematic literature review. *Sustainability*, 16(10), 3893. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su16103893>
- Tandfonline. (2023). Cultural heritage tourism as a catalyst for sustainable development: The case of old Oyo town in Nigeria. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 29(1–2), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2023.2169332>
- UNESCO. (2021). World Heritage and Sustainable Tourism Programme. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tourism/>
- UNESCO. (2022). UNESCO World Heritage List of properties in danger. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/>
- UNESCO. (2024). UNESCO promotes sustainable tourism and community conservation in Cameroon. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2743>
- UNESCO. (2025). World Heritage and sustainable development: State of conservation report (WHC/25/47.COM/5D). UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/document/221357>
- UNWTO. (2023). International tourism trends and recovery statistics 2023. United Nations World Tourism Organization. <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-data/international-tourism-and-covid-19>
- Yue, X. (2024). Heritage tourism: Building an important bridge for intercultural exchange in inbound tourism. *Tourism Tribune*, 39(4), 12–14.

[https://doi.org/10.1976/j.cnki.1002-5006.2024.
04.006](https://doi.org/10.1976/j.cnki.1002-5006.2024.04.006)