



DIGITAL DOCUMENTATION OF IGBO CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ITS PRESERVATION IN A PLURALISTIC NIGERIAN SOCIETY

Ihejiekwu Chris O. Ph.D^{1*} & Ekwugha, Grace Chinyere²

¹ Department of Linguistics and Igbo, Faculty of Humanities, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria.

² A Post Graduate Student in the Department of Linguistics and Igbo, Faculty of Humanities, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria.

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Corresponding author:

Ihejiekwu Chris O. Ph.D

Department of Linguistics and Igbo, Faculty of Humanities, Imo State University, Owerri, Nigeria.



Abstract

The Igbo, as one of the three major ethnic groups in a pluralistic Nigerian society, is known for her profuse endowment with multifarious and rich cultural heritage. It is regrettable that this array of Igbo cultural heritage lacks digital documentation. There is currently a perceived danger that most vital aspects of Igbo cultural heritage are still unknown to the young generation, and might be lost as time goes on if not digitally documented. This has made compellingly imperative the need for contemporary Igbo scholars and intelligential to embark on a well-crafted digital documentation of Igbo cultural heritage. Thus, this paper, which examines “digital documentation of Igbo cultural heritage and its preservation in a pluralistic Nigerian society”, begins by taking a look at an overview of digital documentation. It goes ahead to examine Igbo cultural heritage in a pluralistic Nigerian society; digital documentation of Igbo cultural heritage; benefits of digital documentation of Igbo cultural heritage in a modern world; digital tools for documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural heritage; inherent snags in documentation of Igbo cultural heritage and ways of overcoming the snags. The paper adopted qualitative and descriptive research design method and relied heavily on secondary sources of data such as text books, journal articles and online materials. It concludes by stressing that the conversion of all paper-based documents containing Igbo culture, language, folklores, traditional religion, history, literature, proverbial sayings, norms, values and so on, into digital formats as well as creation of efficient document management system to guarantee their safety, is not only an onerous task that requires expertise but also a capital intensive project. As part of the way forward, the paper suggests the need for Igbo in the Diaspora and at home to work in energy in order to mobilize adequate funds for successful actualization of this noble project, digital documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural heritage.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, digitalization, documentation, Igbo, Nigerian society.

Introduction

Igbo land, no doubt, is a repository of complex and multifarious cultural heritage, which define and shape their values, worldview and identity as a people. The Igbo have diverse kinds of material and non-material cultural heritage inherited from their forefathers. These motley arrays of Igbo cultural heritage are associated with great social, economic, political and historical and research significance (Obasi, 2026). Cultural heritage has to do with the totality of the people's way of life. It is the whole body of knowledge and behaviour, ideas and objects that constitute the common heritage of a society. Culture covers every aspect of a people's life in their effort to deal with their environment and with one another (Akama, 2007). Igbo cultural heritage and philosophy attribute sanctity to natural elements and foster reverence for the environment and communal identity (Mbalisi, Mbalisi & Nwaiwu, 2025). It benefits present and future generations of a people by maintaining the transmission of physical and intangible attributes of a group artifacts. This is in line with Dim and Osadebe (2009) in Ogbu and Igwebuike (2024) who describe cultural heritage as the lagacies of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present for the benefit of future generation. Igbo cultural heritage embodies both tangible and intangible aspects. Tangible or material culture is all the concrete realities made and utilized by man in the society (Egwuonwu, Umeji & Ubaka, 2024). These include shrines, groves, photographs, museum objects, archival materials, archaeological sites, monuments, musical instruments, sculptures, pottery, wood work, terracotta, costumes, textiles, jewelry, handcrafted artifacts and architectural forms (Ogbu & Igwebuike, 2024). Intangible cultural heritage of the people, on the other hand includes, folktales, poetry, riddles, songs, oral traditions, religion, proverbial expressions, festivals, music and dance, rites, indigenous knowledge systems and so on.

It is, however, regrettable that Igbo traditional institutions are rapidly being emasculated by modern forces of change, such as globalization, pentecostalism, urbanization, education, science and technology advancement and influx of western cultural values, which aggressively oppose and erode traditional values (Odiboh, et al, 2018 in Mbalisi, Mbalisi & Nwaiwu 2025). It is unfortunate that present day Igbo land is replete with environmental factors and developments that seem to be inimical to the survival and intergenerational transmission of Igbo cultural heritage, (Nwosu, Onyemachi, Chilaka, Onuoha, Nwosu, Nnadi & Igbeaku, 2025). Globalization, urbanization, educational policies and media influence, according to them, have continued to endanger and subject the highly cherished Igbo language and other cultural heritage of the people to threat of extinction.

Numerous traditional religious and cultural practices, indigenous norms and values, oral histories, rituals, sacred objects and sites, traditional economic and political systems, indigenous technologies, proverbial expressions, dressing pattern, artistic expressions, traditional crafts, dance, music, cuisine and so on, for which the Igbo people were known in time past, are now at risk of extinction. The fact that most of our wise, knowledgeable and sagacious elder statesmen, reputed to be custodians of Igbo culture and traditions, have died with their wealth of knowledge, without proper documentation, further complicates this challenge. Documentation not only makes it easy to share cultural resources but is also a sure way of preserving them (Ugwoke & Ugwoke 2025). Preserving this vast cultural heritage of the Igbo is essential for maintaining identity and pride, educating future generations and attracting global interests through tourism (Osinaike, 2024).

Thanks to advancement in science and technology, which has brought the Igbo into the world of limitless possibilities, where diverse challenges are creatively handled and surmounted. Documentation of Igbo cultural heritage which has remained pathetically inadequate can effectively be handled through digital documentation. By converting cultural resources into digital formats, the Igbo can truly safeguard endangered cultural heritage for future generations.

An overview of Digital Documentation

Digital documentation is the process of converting materials or information available in analogue format into digital or machine readable format. It refers to the systematic collection, recording, storage and dissemination of information via digital technologies such as scanner, camera or other electronic devices (Ogbu & Igwebuike, 2024). It encompasses the transformation of information into digitalized content, stored and transmitted across networks of internet and computer devices to facilitate communication, collaboration and cultural exchange in unprecedented ways (Mbalisi, Mbalisi & Nwaiwu, 2025). When efforts are made or actions taken to transfer all information in oral format, in text books, newspapers, magazines and journals into computer-based formats for easy storage in the internet, as well as sharing and transmission them from one person to another via social media platforms or internet-mediated channels, it becomes digital documentation. Digitalizing the above information connotes transferring them from their original format to a machine readable format. Machine-readable format presents data that is represented by bits or bytes (Ogbu & Igwebuike, 2024). Conversion of analogue-based materials into digital formats provides individuals, communities and institutions the opportunity to preserve and disseminate valuable knowledge for present and future generations.

Igbo Cultural Heritage in a Pluralistic Nigerian Society.

Igbo cultural heritage entails the whole panoply of cultural resources - way or pattern of life, beliefs, practices, artifacts, sacred objects, museums, archaeological sites and so on, for which the Igbo are known, and which were inherited from previous generations. As observed by Ezenagu (2020), cultural heritage can be tangible, that is, expressions of the societies that are living or lived in the area, example include landscape, monuments traditional buildings, archaeological sites, temples, historic cities or intangible that is, the immaterial cultural expressions and traditions of societies rooted in cultural values and practices of both past and present generations. These include traditional ways of life, social practices, festivals, music and craftsmanship. These resources, according to Ogbu and Igwebuike (2024), are created from interactions of human beings and the environment where they find themselves. The Igbo people, no matter the angle from which one looks at it, are uniquely blessed and profusely endowed with a motley array of cultural heritage that distinguishes them from other ethnic groups in a pluralistic Nigerian society.

Nigeria is historically and culturally rich, with diverse cultural heritage resources and this depicts the nation as an epitome of heterogeneity and pluralism in contemporary Afro centric discourse. As rightly pointed out by Ogbu and Igwebuke (2024), there are incredible examples of human creativity that can be found in almost every part of the country, and this is more pronounced among the Igbo, which is one of the three largest ethnic groups in a pluralistic Nigerian society. Pluralistic Nigerian society denotes the fact of exhibition of cultural diversity and complexity. Pluralistic means exhibiting pluralism, that is, the existence in one society of a number of groups that belong to different races/ethnic origins or have different political or religious beliefs (Hornby, 1995). Nigeria

is a pluralistic society having many ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural groups that make her diversity complex as well as intriguing. The ethnic groups, which number more than 350, have their individual political, social, cultural and economic life, coexist within a single political framework or entity called Nigeria (Obiajulu, Obi & Iwuoha, 2016). These pronounced diversity and cultural pluralism create a culturally competitive environment where diverse cultural heritages compete for relevance and supremacy. The above scenario presents a threat to the survival of Igbo cultural heritage in Nigeria.

Besides, there are other factors that constitute threats to sustainable relevance and survival of Igbo cultural heritage in this modern time. Ogbu Nwosu et al (2025), identify globalization, westernization, western education, rural-urban migration, poor documentation, death of elderly Igbo custodians of culture, regular use of English language to communicate in Igbo families, and media influence, as parts of factors that threaten the survival of Igbo cultural heritage in a pluralistic Nigerian Society.

The Need for Digital Documentation of Igbo Cultural Heritage

Igbo cultural heritage, which is the cultural heritage of more than 30 million people is currently at risk of being eroded as a result of lack of well crafted digital documentation and modern forces of socio-cultural change, that threaten its survival in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Nigerian society (Nwosu, et al, 2025). Igbo cultural materials, resources, languages and indigenous knowledge system are described by Orji and Umeobi (2025), as endangered cultural heritage, facing the risk of possible extinction if nothing serious is done to ensure their revitalization in a rapidly changing world. According to UNESCO (2017) cited in Nwosu et al (2025), Igbo cultural heritage is vulnerable with dwindling intergenerational transmission endangering its continued existence. Problem of endangerment faced by Igbo cultural heritage is directly linked with the debilitating state of Igbo language in the society today. Traditional linguistic heritage has been weakened, especially among young people, by urbanization, globalization and the prevalence of the use of English in media and education (Emenanjo, 2015 in Nwosu et al, 2025).

The dwindling influence and value of Igbo language has equally taken its negative toll on proverbs, folktales, oral histories, dance, songs and music, which determine Igbo identity, structure and cultural pride among diverse cultural groups in Nigeria. The loss of Igbo language endangers not only communication but also the maintenance of a distinctive ideology, because language and culture are inextricably bound up together (Nwosu, et al, 2025). The place of digital documentation in preserving and revitalizing Igbo complex and rich cultural heritage cannot be underscored. Digital platforms can contribute significantly to the preservation and storage of Igbo indigenous cultural values and resources for posterity (Nwafor, 2020).

Benefits of Digital Documentation of Igbo Cultural Heritage in a Modern World

Digital documentation of Igbo cultural heritage is, indeed, associated with benefits of immense proportion and magnitude. No doubt, it serves as the most efficient and reliable way of preserving Igbo oral histories, indigenous knowledge systems, rituals, rites, folklores, songs, cultural values, beliefs, local languages, agricultural practices, community laws, and mores from being lost as time goes on (Ugwoke & Ugwoke, 2025). Since this indigenous cultural heritage, according to Chukwu (2015), Okoro (2020), in Ugwoke and Ugwoke (2025), is handed down to posterity through

oral tradition, it exhibits high tendency of being lost or going into extinction if not properly documented.

Similarly, digital documentation guarantees the integrity, sanctity and inviolability of valuable cultural resources of the Igbo as they are shared and transmitted from one generation to another. As observed by Ugwoke and Ugwoke (2025), digital documentation ensures that preservation of such cultural heritage is in its complete raw form for posterity and that documentation for planning and decision making is done in its intact and holistic nature to serve the intended purpose.

Digital documentation is vital in the promotion of a seamless intergenerational transmission of diverse Igbo cultural heritage, even when the elderly custodians of culture and tradition have all passed away. It also guarantees quick access, easy assessment and easy reference to documented or stored information for research purposes, for cross-cultural analysis and mutual sharing among the Igbo and their neighboring ethnic groups (Eke & Salawu, 2025). In corroborating the above, Ezeonu, Nwokedi and Chibuikem (2026), remark that digital documentation and preservation emerged as practical solutions, and advancement in technology that make it easier to record audio and video materials, store information in digital archives and share content through the internet. It enhances the ability of Igbo communities to preserve and show their cultural narratives in formats that are enduring, accessible and adaptable to contemporary life. Similarly, it promotes global access to Igbo cultural resources, engenders tourism, cultural as well as economic development.

Digital Tools for Documentation and Preservation of Igbo Cultural Heritage

Advancement in science and technology has given rise to the emergence of diverse digital devices that are vitally important for documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural resources. Digital devices or technologies are electronic tools, systems and resources that generate, store or process data (Ugwoke & Ugwoke, 2025). Some of these digital tools play enormous role in daily communication and can be of great relevance to cultural preservation.

Internet/Social media platforms:

The internet and social media have redefined and enhanced many aspects of people's life by facilitating inter-personal communication and storage of information. In the same vein, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Telegram and electronic mail (e-mail) can help in cultural transmission, documentation and preservation by creating online spaces that favour storage, quick retrieval and dissemination of cultural resources (Ugwoke & Ugwoke, 2025).

Electronic Library (e-Library) :

Electronic Library (e-Library) is another cardinal digital tool that can serve efficiently for digital documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural heritage. The whole galaxy of Igbo cherished arts, customs, norms, values, ideologies, festivals, documents dealing with sacred sites, dress patterns, cuisine, features of their traditional monuments, architectures, technology and related artifacts can be safely stored in e-Library or digital library, to retain their cultural, historical, educational, recreational and religious significance, among future generations of the Igbo and their neighbours (Nwofor. Chikaodi & Nwako, 2023).

Virtual Reality (VR):

Another tool is Virtual Reality (VR), which has been adjudged potent and viable by digital technologists as being able to preserve cultural heritage, due to its capacity to be used to reconstruct ancient cities, simulate historical events and revive endangered language and cultural practices (Ugwu & Obasi, 2026).

Digital photography:

Digital photography can be used to capture tangible aspects of Igbo cultural heritage, such as museums, sculptures, historical monuments, sacred sites, traditional architectural designs, and diverse hand-crafted artifacts, musical instruments as well as masquerade costumes. Video documentation can also be used to supplement digital photography in this regard. Mobile applications, which are software programs designed to run on smartphones and tablets, provide a convenient and accessible way for users to engage with content on the go (Ugwoke & Ugwoke, 2025). They stand as valuable digital tools for documentation and preservation of information on Igbo cultural heritage from forces of cultural erosion (Morgan, 2020).

Artificial intelligence (AI) driven tools can bring about a tremendous change and enhancement to the entire efforts at preservation documentation, and exchange of cultural heritage, and offers great opportunity for safeguarding the people's rich and diverse cultural legacies (Oveh, Aziken & Atomatofa, 2025). Related in importance to the tool above, is the Geographic Information System (GIS). GIS can be a very important tool for creating interactive digital maps of different cultural land marks, documentation of geographical distribution of traditional festivals, ritual practices, sacred sites, historical cities, archaeological remains and cultural practices. This digital technology helps researchers to document and preserve cultural resources based on the places where found (Oveh, Aziken & Atomatofa, 2025).

Inherent Snags in Digital Documentation of Igbo Cultural Heritage

Despite the breakthroughs recorded in digital technologies in recent times, digital documentation of Igbo cultural heritage is still undermined by a number of impediments, which include:

Possibility of distortion of Igbo Culture: Digital documentation presents the risk of distorting, changing or modifying authentic Igbo culture. thereby affecting their authenticity and originality, and this has negative impact on cultural continuity, identity formation and cultural transmission to future generations (Mbalisi, Mbalisi & Nwaiwu, 2025).

Possibility of loss of documented cultural resources to disasters or forces of deterioration: There is the possibility that most of the valuable cultural resources digitally documented and stored either in the public libraries or internet may be lost to disaster like fire, flood, natural aging and corruption by virus or system collapse etc. (Ogbu&Igwebuike, 2024).

Digital divide: Most rural communities, institutions and organizations in Igbo land lack reliable internet connectivity, and where there is no reliable internet connectivity or limited network capacity, digital documentation of Igbo cultural resources cannot be successfully achieved.

Inadequate technological infrastructure: In a situation where technological infrastructure is inadequate to support or undertake digitization and preservation of cultural heritage, digital documentation of Igbo cultural resources becomes difficult. Lack of modern hardware such as scanners, servers, computers, good laptops, and digital storage, poses a serious challenge to efficient digital

documentation of cultural resources (Ezewudo, Nwokedi & Chibuikem, 2026).

Rickety supply of electricity: Unsteady supply of electricity in rural Igbo communities is posing a problem to the use of digital devices for preservation of cultural materials.

Lack of funds: Lack of funds hampers digital documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural heritage as it takes sizeable amount of funds to purchase digital devices like scanners, digital tapes, cameras, servers, computers and so on. Technological support, maintenance of computer hardware, software procurement and services, require significant funds.

Lack of skilled manpower: Lack of skilled manpower or ICT experts to manage digital technologies in the rural communities makes the whole process ineffectual and unfruitful.

The Way Forward

To effectively navigate the above snags that limit digital documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural heritage, the paper makes the following suggestions as the way forward.

1. There should be proper evaluation and scrutiny of all cultural resources to be documented to ensure that there is no adulteration or distortion which has the capacity to undermine the authenticity of such cultural heritage.
2. There is the need for Igbo in the Diaspora and at home to work in energy in order to mobilize adequate funds for successful actualization of this noble project, digital documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural heritage. Wealthy Igbo sons and daughters at home and in the Diaspora should partner with the government to ensure reliable internet connectivity and adequate network capacity in Igbo rural communities.
3. Similarly, there must be urgent provision of adequate technological infrastructure such as digital libraries, laptops, computers, scanners, servers and digital cameras, etc. in tertiary institutions found in Igbo land.
4. Supply of electricity should be improved in Igbo rural communities to guarantee effective utilization of diverse digital tools for cultural preservation.
5. Adequate and sustainable funding should be guaranteed. Adequate and sustainable funding are vital to long-term digital documentation and preservation of Igbo cultural resources in our higher institutions' libraries and cultural institutions. To address the above issue, the five governors of the five states in Igbo land should ensure that greater part of their states' budget is devoted for digital documentation of Igbo cultural resources and revitalization of endangered cultural heritage.
6. Capacity building and manpower development programmes should be encouraged. This will ensure that digital technologists, digital cultural archivists, computer and ICT experts are produced and existing ones retrained and adequately equipped with the needed technical skills for modern digital documentation and digital library management (Ezewudo, Nwokedi & Chibuikem, 2026).

Conclusion

The current status of Igbo cultural heritage in Nigeria's pluralistic society calls for urgent and actionable strategies that will facilitate digital documentation of the endangered cultural resources in order to preserve them for future generations. Igbo cultural heritage is facing fierce threats from globalization, western cultural influence, rapid urbanization, social change, influence of Christianity and

social media, which push it steadily to the sinister brink of extinction. There is currently a perceived danger that most vital aspects of Igbo cultural heritage are still unknown to the young generation, and might be lost as time goes on if not digitally documented. This has made compellingly imperative the need for contemporary Igbo scholars and intelligential to embark on a well-crafted digital documentation of Igbo cultural heritage.

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