

Traditional Art Forms and Cultural Identity Preservation in Enugu

Omeke Edward Akamchukwu

Department of Fine and Applied Art, Federal College of Education, Eha-Amufu, Enugu State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

Enugu State, in South-East Nigeria, has a dense heritage of traditional art forms, including masquerade performance, uli painting, pottery, music and verbal arts. Together these have long carried the cultural identity of Igbo communities. Evangelical Christianity, urbanisation, formal schooling, language shift and the commercialisation of culture are now changing how these forms are practised and passed on. This article examines how traditional art forms in Enugu serve as vehicles of cultural identity, what threatens their continuity, and which strategies can safeguard them. It draws on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity as both "being" and "becoming", Laurajane Smith's critique of the authorised heritage discourse, and UNESCO's framework for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Methodologically, it is an integrative documentary review of peer-reviewed studies, monographs and policy instruments on Enugu and the wider Igbo cultural area, analysed with reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes emerged. First, art forms act as living archives of identity. Second, erosion pressures are uneven and are driven mainly by religious change, urbanisation, weakening apprenticeship and language shift. Third, communities show adaptive resilience through youth-led revival, festivalisation and artistic reinterpretation. Fourth, the institutions that transmit these arts are fragmented. The article proposes a five-pillar Enugu Living Heritage Safeguarding Framework: community-led documentation, intergenerational transmission, curriculum integration, ethical economic valorisation and participatory governance. It concludes that preservation should aim at keeping practices alive and meaningful to their communities, not at freezing them in place.

Keywords: *cultural identity; intangible cultural heritage; masquerade; uli; Igbo art; Enugu; safeguarding*

INTRODUCTION

Traditional art forms are among the most visible and enduring expressions of a people's identity. In Igbo communities of South-East Nigeria, art has never been a separate aesthetic domain. It is woven into religion, governance, social control, rites of passage and everyday

life. In their classic survey, Cole and Aniakor (1984) describe Igbo arts as inseparable from "community and cosmos". Masquerades embody ancestral spirits and enforce social norms. Uli designs painted on bodies and walls communicate beauty, status and moral values. Pottery, carving, music and verbal arts record local knowledge and history. Losing these forms therefore means more than losing aesthetic objects. It weakens the shared memories and symbols through which a community recognises itself.

Enugu State, created in 1991 and made up of 17 local government areas, is a strong setting for studying this relationship. It contains the Nsukka cultural area, known for masquerade complexes such as Odo, Omabe and Adada (Asogwa & Odoh, 2021; Okoro, 2022). It also has pottery centres such as Inyi in Oji River LGA (Echeta, 2013), and it is home to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Through the work of Uche Okeke and his colleagues, the university became the base of the "Nsukka school", which reworked the uli tradition into a modern visual language (Okeke-Agulu, 2015; Ottenberg, 1997). The state therefore contains both the "source" communities of traditional art and the institutions that reinterpret it.

The question of identity preservation has become more urgent under globalisation. Tomlinson (1999) describes cultural globalisation as a process of "deterritorialisation", in which the ties between culture and locality loosen as media, migration and consumer goods circulate worldwide. For Enugu communities, this means that young people increasingly form their tastes and self-images through global popular culture, social media and urban lifestyles, while the village square, the shrine and the potter's yard lose some of their power to shape identity. Deterritorialisation also opens new channels. Masquerade performances circulate as online videos, uli motifs appear in fashion and graphic design, and diaspora communities stage Igbo cultural festivals abroad. Understanding how traditional art forms preserve identity therefore requires attention to both erosion and re-embedding.

Method

The study adopted an integrative documentary review design. This design suits research questions that require synthesising theoretically and methodologically diverse literatures (Snyder, 2019). Document analysis was used as a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating printed and electronic documents to elicit meaning and develop empirical understanding (Bowen, 2009). Sources were identified through searches of Taylor & Francis Online, AOSIS (HTS Theological Studies), African Journals Online (AJOL), the Directory of

Open Access Journals, IntechOpen and Google Scholar. The searches combined terms for art forms (masquerade, mmanwu, uli, pottery, Igbo art, dialect), place (Enugu, Nsukka, Igbo) and identity or heritage (cultural identity, heritage, preservation, revival). Foundational monographs and the principal international and national policy instruments were added purposively.

Sources were included if they (a) were peer-reviewed articles, scholarly books or chapters, or official policy instruments; (b) addressed a traditional art form practised in Enugu State or the Igbo cultural area to which it belongs; and (c) discussed identity, transmission, change or safeguarding. Only sources whose bibliographic details could be verified were retained. The final corpus comprised ten Enugu-focused or Igbo-specific empirical and documentary studies (summarised in Table 1), supported by eleven theoretical, methodological, historical and policy sources. The corpus was analysed with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis moved through six phases: familiarisation, coding of findings and arguments, generating candidate themes, reviewing themes against the full corpus, defining the themes, and writing up. Codes were developed both inductively from the data and deductively from the theoretical framework, especially Hall's being/becoming distinction and the UNESCO safeguarding measures. Because the study relies on published sources, its findings are limited by the geographic and thematic coverage of the existing literature, a point taken up in the limitations.

Summary of Enugu-Focused and Igbo-Specific Studies in the Review Corpus

Table 1

Study	Art form	Locality	Design/data	Key finding relevant to identity
Asogwa & Odoh (2021)	Adada masquerade	Nsukka area	Fieldwork: observation, photography, interviews (n = 17); liminality theory	Adada symbolism anchors and projects Nsukka-Igbo identity; its absence from public space is linked to evangelism, urbanism and modernism.
Okoro (2022)	Omabe festival	Nsukka area	Ethno-aesthetic and phenomenological study	The triennial festival combines music, masking and ritual with therapeutic and healing functions; it is threatened by Pentecostalism, urbanisation and globalisation, although adult interest persists.

Uwaegbute (2021)	Masquerade practices	Three Nsukka towns	Two-year qualitative study of youth	Christian youth take part actively because of cultural attachment, identity, social cohesion and commercial gain; Christianity has not curtailed masquerading.
Ejikeme et al. (2026)	Omabe, Edi, Echaricha, Ishi-ma, Akatakpa	Igbo-Eze South LGA	Ethnography; interviews with 25 custodians in five villages	Masquerades act as spiritual intermediaries, social regulators, educators and tourist attractions; tourism visibility is limited by modernisation and religious opposition.
Mamah et al. (2021)	Verbal art (greetings)	Enugwu-Ezike, Igbo-Eze North LGA	Linguistic documentation	Young speakers are abandoning dialect-specific greeting forms; documentation, media and digital engagement are recommended.
Echeta (2013)	Pottery	Igbo pottery centres, including Inyi	Descriptive study of apprenticeship	Apprenticeship under master potters, mostly women, is the lifeline of the craft's continuity.
Chukueggu & Onwuakpa (2016)	Modern art drawing on uli	Nsukka school	Art-historical analysis of Uche Okeke's work	Natural Synthesis fuses indigenous forms with modern practice, carrying uli into contemporary art.
Ottenberg (1997); Okeke-Agulu (2015)	Uli-based modernism	University of Nigeria, Nsukka	Art-historical monographs	The Nsukka artists turned a declining women's art into a basis for postcolonial modernism and cultural self-definition.
Igboanusi (2006)	Igbo language (the medium of verbal and performing arts)	Igbo area	Sociolinguistic study	Declining intergenerational use raises concern about Igbo's long-term vitality.

Note. LGA = local government area. Studies are listed by art form, not chronologically.

Findings

Theme 1: Art Forms as Living Archives of Identity

Across the corpus, traditional art forms appear as repositories of collective memory and markers of belonging. Asogwa and Odoh (2021) show that the iconography of the Adada

masquerade, including its costume, headpiece and performance, "anchor[s], ritualize[s] and project[s]" the identity of the Nsukka Igbo. It also records the community's historical contacts with neighbouring cultures. Okoro (2022) describes how the Omabe festival marks the return of ancestral spirits and organises community life around music, sacrifice and graded masquerade types. Some masquerades entertain, others enforce discipline, exorcise, or expose wrongdoing. In Igbo-Eze South, Ejikeme et al. (2026) identify five masquerade traditions that link the living and the ancestors, regulate conduct and teach values to the young. In Hall's (1990) terms, these forms express identity as "being": they make an ancestral, place-bound self visible and felt.

Material and verbal arts play a similar role. Echeta (2013) shows that pottery centres such as Inyi are organised around master potters, most of them women, whose techniques embody community-specific knowledge. Uli painting, historically practised by women on bodies and walls, carried a vocabulary of motifs tied to Igbo aesthetics and values (Cole & Aniakor, 1984). Verbal arts such as greetings, proverbs, praise names and songs depend on local dialects. Mamah et al. (2021) show that the greeting repertoire of Enugwu-Ezike, which is organised by time, occasion and social relationship, encodes local norms of respect and solidarity. The corpus therefore supports a broad view of "art form" that includes performance, craft, visual design and speech. Each is a distinct channel through which identity is stored and passed on.

Theme 2: Uneven Pressures of Erosion

The second theme concerns the forces that weaken these archives. Religious change is the pressure most often named. Asogwa and Odoh (2021) attribute Adada's retreat from public space to "Christian evangelism, urbanism and modernism". Okoro (2022) reports that evangelism and Pentecostalism "have dealt severe blows" to Igbo cultural institutions, and Ejikeme et al. (2026) find that church teaching discourages youth participation in masquerades. Urbanisation and migration draw young people away from the village settings where performance and apprenticeship take place. Formal schooling and waged work compete with the long apprenticeships that crafts such as pottery require (Echeta, 2013). Language shift adds a quieter threat. When children stop acquiring local dialects and the Igbo language, the verbal arts built on them lose their audience and future performers (Igboanusi, 2006; Mamah et al., 2021).

Commercialisation is a further, more ambivalent pressure. Payment for performances, tourism and the sale of masks and crafts give practitioners new incentives. Uwaegbute (2021) lists economic gain among the motives for youth participation in masquerades. Market logic can, however, favour spectacle over meaning, shorten ritual sequences to suit audiences, and separate objects from the contexts that give them significance. Ejikeme et al. (2026) show that the tourism potential of masquerades in Igbo-Eze South is real but under-developed, which suggests that the question is not whether culture should earn income but on whose terms. The same pressure can therefore sustain or distort an art form, depending on who controls it.

These pressures are uneven, however. They fall more heavily on some forms than others and play out differently across communities. Masquerades with strong ritual or secret-society dimensions are more exposed to religious objection than entertainment masquerades. Women's arts such as uli body painting declined early, as new beauty practices and religious norms spread (Cole & Aniakor, 1984; Ottenberg, 1997). Pottery faces competition from industrial containers but keeps niche markets. This unevenness warns against a single narrative of "cultural death". Safeguarding has to start with an art-form-specific and community-specific diagnosis of risk.

Theme 3: Adaptive Resilience and Reinterpretation

Alongside loss, the corpus records substantial resilience. Uwaegbute's (2021) two-year study in three Nsukka towns found that Christian youth took part in masquerades without reservation. Their reasons were cultural attachment, community identity, social cohesion and income, and the study concludes that Christianity "has not succeeded in curtailing" masquerading. Okoro (2022) likewise notes renewed adult interest in Omabe. This matches Hall's (1990) idea of identity as "becoming". Young people are not simply rejecting or inheriting tradition but renegotiating it. They separate cultural from religious meanings, reframe masquerades as heritage and entertainment, and add new sources of prestige and income.

Artistic reinterpretation is the second form of resilience. At the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Uche Okeke's philosophy of Natural Synthesis, the fusion of indigenous forms with modern practice, turned uli from a declining women's art into the basis of a celebrated modernist idiom (Chukueggu & Onwuakpa, 2016; Okeke-Agulu, 2015). Ottenberg (1997) documents how artists of the Nsukka group, among them Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu,

Chike Aniakor and El Anatsui, drew on uli line, Igbo motifs and local materials to create work that circulates internationally. This shows that preservation can happen through transformation. The uli line survives today partly because it moved from bodies and walls into galleries, books and design. The shift also raises a question that Smith's (2006) framework makes visible: when elite institutions reinterpret a tradition, do its original community custodians, here mainly rural women, keep ownership and benefit?

Festivalisation is a third form of adaptation. State and community masquerade festivals and tourism initiatives give traditional performance new audiences and economic value (Ejikeme et al., 2026). Such events can be understood as "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). They are not inauthentic for that reason, but they do reshape meaning, for instance when sacred or secret elements are performed for spectators. The corpus suggests that festivalisation sustains visibility most effectively when communities retain control over which elements are shown and which stay restricted.

Theme 4: Fragmented Transmission Institutions

The final theme concerns the institutions that transmit art forms, which are numerous but weakly connected. Families, age grades and masquerade societies transmit performance. Master-apprentice relationships transmit crafts (Echeta, 2013). Universities transmit reinterpreted forms (Okeke-Agulu, 2015), and state agencies organise festivals. National policy recognises the value of these arts. The Cultural Policy for Nigeria (Federal Government of Nigeria, 1988) commits government to preserving and promoting cultural heritage and using it in education. The corpus, however, offers little evidence of coordinated action between community custodians, schools, universities and government in Enugu. Documentation is scattered across academic outputs that practitioners rarely see, and the linguistic studies recommend media and digital strategies that have not been systematically put in place (Mamah et al., 2021). This fragmentation fits Kurin's (2004) warning that safeguarding succeeds only when it strengthens the practitioners' own systems of transmission. Table 2 summarises the four themes.

Thematic Synthesis of the Review Corpus

Table 2

Theme	Description	Principal sources
1. Living archives of identity	Masquerade, uli, pottery and verbal art store collective memory, values and	Asogwa & Odoh (2021); Cole & Aniakor (1984); Echeta (2013);

	belonging (identity as "being").	Ejikeme et al. (2026); Mamah et al. (2021); Okoro (2022)
2. Uneven erosion pressures	Religious change, urbanisation, schooling and waged work, and language shift weaken transmission; the risk varies by art form.	Asogwa & Odoh (2021); Ejikeme et al. (2026); Igboanusi (2006); Okoro (2022)
3. Adaptive resilience	Youth renegotiation, artistic reinterpretation (Natural Synthesis) and festivalisation keep forms alive through change (identity as "becoming").	Chukueggu & Onwuakpa (2016); Okeke-Agulu (2015); Ottenberg (1997); Uwaegbute (2021)
4. Fragmented transmission	Families, guilds, universities and the state transmit art forms separately, with little coordination or feedback to custodians.	Echeta (2013); Federal Government of Nigeria (1988); Kurin (2004); Mamah et al. (2021)

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that the relationship between traditional art forms and cultural identity in Enugu is best described as dynamic continuity. The art forms continue to anchor a shared sense of Igbo and local identity, as the first theme shows. They do so, however, through constant renegotiation of their meanings, settings and practitioners, as the third theme shows. This supports Hall's (1990) argument that identity involves both "being" and "becoming". It also challenges any preservation approach that treats tradition as a fixed inventory to be protected from change. The Nsukka uli revival and the youth masquerade revival are both cases where change was the means of continuity.

The findings also show why Smith's (2006) critique of the authorised heritage discourse applies. Many of the most visible preservation successes in Enugu, such as the international reputation of uli-based modernism and state masquerade festivals, have been led by universities, artists and government. Communities are the actual bearers of heritage, and when they are treated only as sources of material or as performers, the gains of visibility may be offset by losses of control, meaning and benefit. The UNESCO (2003) Convention addresses this by putting communities at the centre of safeguarding. As Kurin (2004) warns, however, its principles achieve little unless they are turned into support for practitioners' own transmission systems.

Finally, the evidence of uneven erosion warns against generalised "culture is dying" rhetoric. Religious opposition, the most cited pressure, has not produced uniform decline. Uwaegbute (2021) documents vigorous participation among Christian youth, while Asogwa and Odoh (2021) document the retreat of Adada. These differences probably reflect the

specific character of each art form (sacred or secular, secret or public), the attitudes of local churches and leaders, and the availability of economic and social incentives. Safeguarding strategies should therefore be diagnostic and differentiated rather than uniform.

Digital media are an important and under-examined frontier. The deterritorialisation that Tomlinson (1999) describes cuts both ways. Social media expose young people to global cultural models, but they also let them record, share and celebrate local masquerades, songs and designs to audiences at home and in the diaspora. Mamah et al. (2021) explicitly recommend digital platforms for engaging youth with endangered dialect forms. Community-owned digital archives, short-form video and online Igbo-language content could therefore become instruments of preservation, provided that communities decide what may be recorded and shared. Some masquerade knowledge is restricted, and uncontrolled circulation can itself be a form of cultural harm.

CONCLUSION

Traditional art forms in Enugu, including masquerade, uli, pottery and verbal arts, remain vital carriers of cultural identity even as religious change, urbanisation, schooling and language shift reshape them. The evidence shows loss in some places and remarkable resilience and reinvention in others. Preserving cultural identity in Enugu therefore depends less on freezing traditions than on sustaining the conditions under which communities can keep practising, transmitting and reinterpreting them. The proposed Enugu Living Heritage Safeguarding Framework offers government, universities, schools, religious leaders and communities a coordinated, community-centred route to that goal, one that treats heritage as a living process of "becoming" as well as a legacy of "being".

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