

Osun Osogbo across the Atlantic: Towards the Preservation and Sustainability of Nigeria's Cultural Heritage

Keynote Speech

Aderemi Suleiman Ajala, PhD

Department of Archaeology & Anthropology

University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria.

asajala@yahoo.co.uk • +234 (0)803 490 6801

ORCID ID No: 0000-0002-4966-9878

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Forward

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African cultural heritage- the most abused of the people's cultural elements over the years.

From the earliest contacts with Arabs and Europeans till the present, a significant cultural objects has been pillaged, trafficked and stolen away from their primary sources in Africa.

Locally too, due to religiosity, enculturation of western civilization, urbanization and industrialization and ignorance, a number of other African cultural objects have been devalued.

Both tangible and intangible cultural heritages are affected.

Tangible cultural objects made of exotic arts designs on bronze, terracotta, wood and metals have been pillaged in warfare, trafficked from many African communities and housed in many museums and knowledge-based institutions in Europe and North America.

The intangible cultural objects like languages, philosophy, values, ethos, norms, and many other African ideal and expressive cultural elements are similarly abused and desecrated.

The worst affected in this abuse of cultural objects is African spirituality in its both tangible and intangible forms.

And in the 21st century, cultural heritage like Osun River and its grooves in Osogbo has been polluted due to anthropogenic activities like the use of fertilizer in farming and urbanization characterized with unregulated dumping of human wastes in the river.

This has increased the quantity of dangerous deposits like metallic substances in the river.

The recent industrial mining activities in Osun state has increased the unwholesome deposit of lead, iron, Zinc and copper in Osun River, therefore desecrating the traditional spirituality attached with Osun River.

Three ideologies of modernization, globalization and industrialization further explained the displacement of African traditions including its cultural heritage.

Africans mostly subscribed to the uprooting of their traditions for modernization which is a force of culture change to exist. Giving the tendency that African traditions are archaic, unscientific and out fashioned against mostly the European and Arabs traditions and values that are seen to be ever current, modern and scientific.

Reinforcing this ignorant and ethnocentric tendency is the wave of globalization which encouraged speedy contacts of culture and formation of global culture which in the 21st century driven by digital technology. In this perspective, cultures like that of African that is very slow in evolving digital technology are subsumed by globally acceptable culture that has better control of digital technology with which such better cultures overshadow the local cultures. While globalization is unavoidable, but the sense in it should display hybridization in culture (glocality), wherein the diffused globalized culture become complimentary to the hosting culture through the processes of localization of such diffused culture.

The neo-modern approaches of industrialization and urbanization in Africa characterized by unbridled wealth creation and uncontrolled patterning of settlements devoid of the preservation of cultural aesthetics and anthropogenic balancing with nature further compounded the atrocities committed against cultural objects in many African communities.

How then do all these perspectives play out on Osun river and its spirituality in Osogbo?

Source and geophysical nature of Osun River

River Osun takes its source from a pool of water in Igede town of Ekiti State.

From Igede town, flows through Ijesha thick forests through Osogbo, Ede, Iwo and joining river Ogun in Ogun State flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

Estimated to flow along the stretches of about 176 kilometers from its source to its convergence with the Ogun River, and running about 83 kilometers from Ogun convergent to the Atlantic Ocean in Lagos state.

Characterized by curves and bends with a number of deep and shallow torrents along its stretches from its source in Igede-Ekiti down to its entrance to the Atlantic Ocean in Lagos.

Osun River flows large volume of waters both in the dry and wet seasons of the year. At the pick of the wet season, the river tends to overflow its bounds in many towns and cities like Osogbo, Ede, Oke-Osun where the river runs with heavy torrents. This occasionally causes challenges of flooding in those communities.

Source and geophysical nature of Osun River

Identifiable evergreen woody forests characterized by different species of tree, woody climbers, and unique herbs and shrubs are found along the River banks.



Also different species of apes-like animals such as African monkeys with their larger concentrations in Osun grooves in Osogbo where the river Osun is dedicated for annual traditional spiritual worship.

The river banks between the Igede forest and Ijebu-Jesa area feature different kinds of bats that regularly invade plants at a particular time of the year, usually around August and September of every year.

Generally along both banks of the river are often sighted, different other types of birds and animals commonly featured mostly during the dry season, perhaps when other streams and river tributaries in the area are short of waters.

Some paths of the river around Ijesha, Osogbo, and Ede axis also feature heavy grazing of cattle by the migrant cattle nomads. In the Ede axis; 29 cattle nomadic settlements were sighted close to the river running between Ede and Oke-Osun in Iwo axis of the river in April 2021.

Other than waterworks located in Ede, the river runs are least exposed to heavy industries.

Generally, forests surrounding river Osun maintain a spectacular serenity, which is often spiritualized by the local inhabitants of the towns and villages located around the water flows. These inhabitants believe in the presence of traditional gods and spirits in the river.

And around Ijebu-Jesha, Ede, Oke-Osun river banks Pentecostal and African Independent Churches have also established churches and prayer grounds, using the water from the river for worship and spiritual cleansing.

Factors determining the water quality of the Osun River are:

- *Temperature

- *Anthropogenic factors such as human economic activities,

- *The presence of biotic and other abiotic elements around the water flow,

These factors influence the quality and quantity of Osun River along its flow.

In a recent study conducted by Anifowose and Oyeboode (2019), it was stated that the Osun water temperature, salinity, and pressure influence the Dissolved Oxygen (DO) concentration of the river water in some selected urban and peri-urban locations where the river runs through.

In Osogbo area, the Dissolved Oxygen (DO) in the Osun River was quite low (2.8–4.0mg/L) and the water temperature is high due to the impacts of the biological objects living around the water.

The biological objects need higher Dissolved Oxygen (DO) levels (5.0–6.0mg/L) to maintain a healthy aquatic ecosystem.

- Oral tradition establishes two beliefs associated with the existence and discovery of the Osun River:
 1. That Osun River is a natural resource created by God, which has being in existence ever before man is said to be living along its course. As an aspect of physical environmental features, the river supports human livelihood.

Its existence attracted human occupation along its long stretch of flowing paths.

Relying on this belief, Osun River is a natural resource meant for both the economic and sustainable uses of humans. Thus, its management is entirely for that purpose.

2. Belief attaching spirituality with the physical feature of the Osun River.

Osun, the name of the river is derived from a Yoruba goddess associated with water in the Yoruba pantheon, it is a spiritual abode of the goddess.

Osun goddess is one of the Yoruba principal deities, which establishes gender equity in form of complementarity between man and woman in Yoruba gender.

Being the Yoruba symbol of womanhood and motherhood, gods' responsibilities on earth are impossible without Osun.

While Osun is a pan Yoruba deity, oral tradition on the foundation of Osun establishes a theography, creating a common religious and political identity for Osogbo people around the spiritual mythology linked with Timehin and Laro who are the founders of Osogbo.

The theography was reinforced to cloth Osun River with spiritual prowess of Osun goddess at the spot of the encounter between Osogbo founders and the spirit of the Osun River.

Covenant established between the two actors;
political identity constructed to link religion with the leadership authority as the first Osogbo palace was built around the spot of the encounter;

collective religious attachment and pan-Atlantic popular image of Osun River vis a vis its spirituality and Osogbo became possible and effective over the years.

Assuming the full potency of spirituality, the water collected from the spot of the encounter assumed new derivative "Agbo"(healing concoction) and the spot housed the shrines of many other gods thus no longer the forest, but the groves

Despite the spiritualization of River Osun in Osogbo, there are different forms of desecration of the River and its spirituality.

1. Natural impacts:

Heavy presence of iron due to the expansive presence of naturally cultivated palm trees along some sections of the river paths.

Abundant of 12% of Zinc was also found in some paths of the river. The concentration of Zn in the river ranged to about 0.75mg/L in Osogbo, with an average of 0.31mg/L in Ede and Iwo parts of the river flow.

There is also concentration of copper in Osun River due to the dissolution of minerals in the soils and rocks

2. The anthropogenic impacts inform of:

Farming especially the use of fertilizer and other copper-based fungicides along the River belts where heavy food and cash crops are cultivated induced copper and metals into the River. Cattle grazing deforests the River belts in Osogbo, Iwo and Ijebu-jesha areas.

Urbanization

A steady rise in Lead (Pb) concentration is witnessed as the river flowed from the peri-urban area to the city.

This is consequent to the increasing anthropogenic activities from the upstream to the downstream.

Also due to the emissions from automobiles, electricity-generating sets, and other anthropogenic activities in urban locations, Osun River in the urban settlement in Osogbo contained Pb doubling its concentration at the peri-urban settlement along its Ijesha paths.

Similarly lead from acid batteries, solder (metallic alloys used when melted to join metallic surface) and alloys are all possible sources of lead in Osun river water in Osogbo, Iwo and Ede river paths.

Land grabbing causes depletion of forest serenity along the River belt in Osogbo and careless waste disposal on the River along its course causes heavy pollution of the River in Ede and Osogbo.

Industrialization

While there is low industrial engagement of River Osun in Osun State, the recent unguided gold-mining activities in the state has increased the rate of the River's toxicity, to the extent that the colour of the River turned brownish.

This has portend serious danger against human use of the water for spirituality and reduced the survival of aquatic animals in the River runs.

The aesthetic, geophysical, chemical features, healing, and spiritual essence of Osun water attract a complex strategy of management and preservation of Osun water as well as the protection of its spiritual values.

Modes of preservation includes:

Its spiritualization- Being an abode of the goddess of Osun who in turn cares and heals the people through its water must be protected.

Serenity and naturality of the River environs deserve being preserved and protected.

Protection and Preservation of Osun River/Grooves

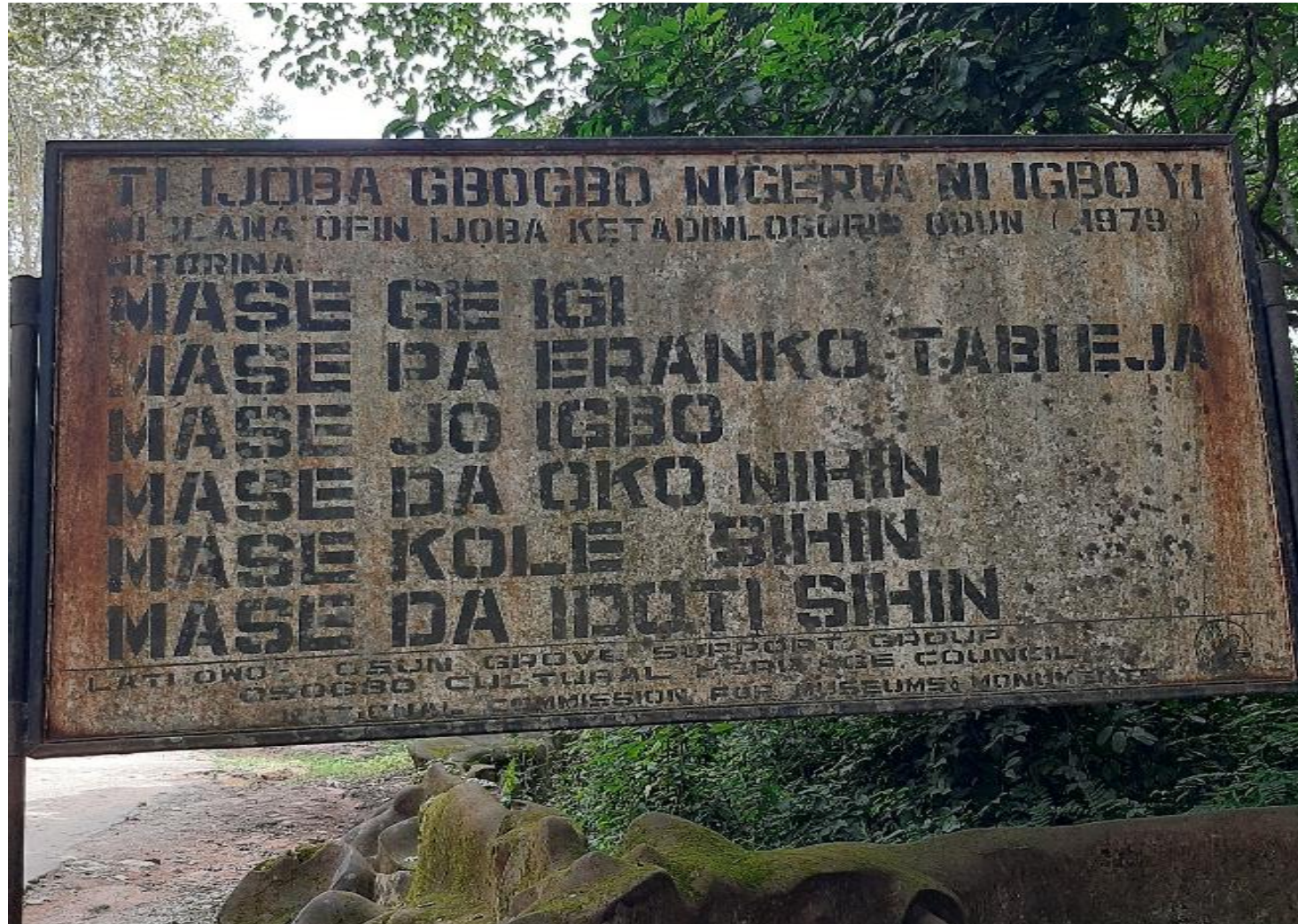
Osun grooves covering about one hundred and twenty hectares of land is protected from arable farming, animal hunting, fish catching, and felling of trees.

The expanse of land parades thousands of precious trees, woody climbers, palms and orchards, bamboos, and varieties of animals and birds characterizing the natural forest with its primary creations.

Indigenous modes of Osun heritage management also involve restrictions imposed on movement and activities in certain places in the grooves. It is forbidden to engage the water of Osun River in Osogbo grooves with filthy practices such as defecating, urinating, washing dead objects in the water; bathing and entering the river with open body wounds.

Protection and Preservation of Osun River/Grooves

Some restrictions are written on a signpost at the entrance of the grooves in Osogbo as follows:



Custodians of the Osun shrine, a composition of the Osun Priest (*Aworo*), the women priestesses of Osun (*Iya Osun*), and both serving and past Osun maids (*Arugba*) are also vested with daily cleaning of the Osun River and its shrine in Osogbo. They are present in the grooves and engaged in picking the dirt on the water surface at the spot of the shrine.

The Role of Suzan Wenger can not be over-emphasized not only on the protection and preservation but much more on the recreation of spiritual artifacts presently decorating the grooves.

The 2005 declaration of Osun grooves as the World Heritage Site, made the grooves and the River to become global treasure, and thus, started to enjoy the national government of Nigeria and international support through UNESCO in its management.

Protection and Preservation of Osun River/Grooves

Considering the unabated abuse, desecration and pollution, Osun river and the grooves seem not to have enjoyed enough institutional and legal actions to secure its effective protection and preservation as cultural heritage.

1. International norms, resolutions and conventions regarding the preservation and protection of cultural heritage must be applicable to Osun cultural heritage and respected.
2. Effective local legislations both at the national and state levels must be made to actively protect Osun cultural heritage from abuse.
3. Specifically, Osun State should show more concerns on the preservation and protection of Osun cultural heritage.
4. Local government areas where Osun River runs through should join together to establish joint team on the preservation and protection of Osun cultural heritage.

Possible Actions and Sustainability

5. There is an urgent need to control the mining pollution caused on Osun river. Government should initiate and fund a comprehensive research on the extent of the mining pollution. Government must also detoxify the polluted river.
6. Public education that will reorient the people's association of cultural objects with satanic instruments must be engaged.
7. Teaching of religious studies in schools should de-emphasize religious evangelism and indoctrination, instead religious philosophy and science must be promoted. By this, more Africans will see the functionality of their cultural heritage, not from the prism of religion.
8. The custodians of Osun goddess should do more in environmental sanitation of Osun grooves and the river.

Conclusion

Despite the spiritual and cultural essence of Osun River and its grooves in Osogbo as cultural heritage, the geophysical and chemical features of the river and its environment, and lots of anthropogenic activities around the river, impose a greater burden of Osun water management and its spirituality on the Osun worshippers and the custodians within the context of preservation and protection.

Osun river, its grooves and spirituality have been widely abused, desecrated and polluted. Therefore there is a need to engage urgent measures towards its protection and preservation as cultural heritage.

THANK YOU ALL FOR LISTENING