



A Study of Ecological Designs and Indigenous Knowledge Systems for Cultural Promotions in Osun Osogbo Festival, Nigeria

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Abstract: Osun, the revered Yoruba goddess of fertility and love, occupies a vital space in both human and non-human realms. With reverence spanning Africa, the Americas and beyond, Osun's cultural relevance and mythological significance exemplifies the profound impact of Yoruba cosmology across the diaspora. This study was therefore designed to explore the promotion of cultural heritage through indigenous knowledge designs, community-led innovations, and greening strategies at the Osun Osogbo festival. Tanja Beer's ecoscenography and Chikaireet. al's indigenous knowledge system theory were adopted as the framework, while the descriptive design, participant observation and interview methods complement these theories. These methods enable us to study the ecoscenographic design trends and dimensions, as well as the influence of indigenous knowledge designs and their relevance in the cultural heritage preservation, conservation and promotion of the Osun Osogbo festival. It is discovered in this study that indigenous knowledge designs and community-led innovations offer valuable insights into sustainable and culturally sensitive initiatives that prioritise the promotion of cultural festivals in the community. This study also revealed the potential of greening strategies in preserving and promoting cultural festivals.

Keywords: Osun, Ecological design, Indigenous knowledge designs, Community-led initiatives, Greening strategies

Introduction

In Yoruba mythology, Osun, the goddess of fertility and love, plays a pivotal role in human and non-human spheres, including fertility, motherhood, prosperity, and protection. Osun's cultural relevance and mythological significance in Yoruba cosmology have earned her widespread reverence globally, with worship manifesting in various forms and names in Brazil,



Cuba, Puerto Rico, Haiti, the United States, and Trinidad and Tobago. Supporting this claim, Umejei notes that in recent times, the attendance and participation at the festival have become a “mixture of local residents, domestic and international tourists” (1). Going by this submission, it is believed that Osun devotees attend and participate in the festival not only as their Holy pilgrimage, where they perform rituals, make sacrifices, as well as seek spiritual guidance from the Osun goddess, but also for other purposes including social cohesion, entertainment, cultural awareness and promotion.

Consequently, the festival is not just a religious ceremony but a multi-dimensional event that reinforces Yoruba identity, traditional governance, and artistic expression. However, the place of environmental consciousness cannot be over emphasized in the Osun Osogbo festival. The reason for this is not unconnected to the fact that the sacred Osun Grove, which hosts the festival’s major rituals, is one of the few remaining pristine forests in Southwestern Nigeria. Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the grove is not only a religious sanctuary but also an ecological treasure, cultural pride and a repository of indigenous knowledge systems.

The concept of ecology in present-day societies is not only about understanding the relationships between organisms and their environment but also about recognising the intricate links between natural systems and human society. Going by this assertion, it is evident that cultural festivals are a vibrant expression of community identity and shared heritage, yet they also serve as powerful platforms for addressing pressing environmental concerns. Establishing this claim, Adjeketa et al. aver that “festivals were celebrated to venerate the forests and solidify man’s kinship with the woods” (2). One of the most captivating examples of these festivals is the Osun Osogbo festival, celebrated annually in Osogbo, Nigeria.

However, indigenous knowledge systems in Africa encompass the collective wisdom, beliefs, customs, and practices of communities passed down through generations. Establishing this claim, Onwuatuegwu and Paul-Mgbeifulike argue that indigenous knowledge encompasses “a wide range of traditional practices, beliefs, and wisdom passed down through generations. It includes knowledge about agriculture, medicine, environmental conservation, social systems,



and cultural practices” (56). These practices, deeply rooted in oral traditions, spiritual beliefs, and practical experiences, shape the cultural identity and continuity of African societies.

Reinforcing the above submission, it is evident that one of the key ways in which indigenous knowledge systems are integrated into cultural festivals is through oral traditions and storytelling. Izu expresses that oral tradition has played a vital role in shaping, preserving, and transforming indigenous musical cultures in Africa. In his thought, oral tradition acts as “vital conduits through which musical practices are passed on from one generation to the other, enabling survival consistent with preserving numerous ethnic musical traditions from external pressure and modern challenges” (Izu 1). Festivals like the Osun Osogbo festival in Nigeria celebrate these oral traditions through performances, poetic recitations, and dramatisations that highlight the wisdom of ancestors.

In his contribution, Abiodun elucidates that African culture has been “embedded in oral literature, as evidenced by the Osun Osogbo festival, which showcases a diverse collection of oral repertoires, folkloric arts, verbal arts, and other forms of oral literature” (Abiodun 6). The preservation of indigenous languages, proverbs, and chants within these festivals reinforces African knowledge frameworks, making them repositories of historical consciousness and cultural pride. More so, traditional governance and social order are also embedded in cultural festivals, reflecting the indigenous systems of leadership and community organisation. Foregrounding this, Ajitoni observes that at the heart of African culture lies the profound philosophy of Ubuntu which blends “communalism, shared values, and interconnectedness within African societies. This concept is central to African thought, reflecting the idea that an individual’s identity is inherently tied to their community and relationships” (Ajitoni 1).

Subsequently, cultural promotion across Africa reflects a collective yet diverse approach, shaped by the continent’s rich history, colonial legacies, and dynamic indigenous knowledge systems. Grindler qtd. in Ndubisi and Ogbo assert that “Africa is a country rich in cultural diversity and heritage. With over 3000 distinct ethnic groups and over 2000 languages” (9). All African countries, despite their distinct identities, recognise the value of preserving and celebrating culture as a tool for national unity, economic development, and global recognition.



“Africa is home for a wealth of traditions, customs, and historical legacies that have been passed down through the ages” (Ogbo and Ndubisi 9). This implies that Africans are culturally oriented people.

It is, therefore, worthy to note here that, promoting African culture involves a wide range of activities that help preserve, share and develop the continent's rich cultural heritage. This includes traditional arts, music and literature, as well as modern expressions that celebrate African identities and histories with no exception to indigenous festivals. It is on this note, that this paper aims to examine the ecological designs and indigenous knowledge systems for cultural promotions in the Osun Osogbo festival, with a view to determining their influence on cultural heritage preservation, conservation and promotion.

Ecological Designs and Cultural Festivals in Contextual Perspectives

The Western perspective on ecology often embodies a reductionist approach, where ecosystems are examined through scientific lenses that focus on empirical data and objective analysis. This method has drawn criticism for placing human interests at the forefront and neglecting the intricate relationships that exist in nature. In his explication, Capra argues that “this mechanistic worldview fails to account for the systemic and relational aspects of life, emphasising the need for a more holistic understanding of ecological networks” (Capra 6). This perspective shift emphasises the need to consider the entire system, rather than just its parts.

Going by Capra’s point of view, recent discussions including Berkes, Colding, and Folke, advocate for a more holistic understanding that appreciates the interconnectedness of all living things. They argue that there is an “emerging consensus regarding the need to look for broader approaches and solutions, not only with resource and environmental issues but along a wide front of societal problems” (1). Crucially, the growing recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge offers profound insights into sustainability. In his postulation, Whyte explains that “indigenous peoples see their knowledge as containing important insights about how to negotiate today’s environmental issues; they often see the renewal of their knowledge systems as a significant strategy for achieving successful adaptation planning” (157). This integrated



approach not only enriches scientific understanding but also provides a clearer picture of our responsibilities as stewards of the planet.

However, the African perspective on ecology offers a refreshing and deeply rooted understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. This viewpoint emphasises the interconnectedness of all living things and highlights a sense of responsibility, diversity and stewardship, valuing harmony with nature over exploitation. In his explication, Mawere explains that “in African traditional religion, the environment is not just a resource base but a sacred entity, inseparably intertwined with the spiritual and moral life of the people” (20). This approach contrasts sharply with some Western methods, which tend to isolate aspects of nature more mechanically.

Another vocal point that sets the African perspective apart is its rich tapestry of local knowledge and traditional practices that have evolved over generations. For example, Siedenburg in his study titled *Local Knowledge and Natural Resource Management in a Peasant Farming Community Facing Rapid Change: A Critical Examination*, notes how peasant farmers in Tanzania utilise local knowledge to manage natural resources effectively, adapting to environmental degradation and market changes. This approach emphasises sustainable land management techniques that balance efficiency with ecosystem health, contrasting with industrial agriculture practices that can deplete and degrade the land.

Moreover, the role of community and social structures in ecological management plays an essential part in this perspective. Social networks and community governance can enhance adaptive capacity and resilience in managing natural resources. As Awuah-Nyamekye notes, “African traditional environmental knowledge systems emphasise communal responsibility, consensus-building, and participatory governance in addressing environmental challenges” (Awuah-Nyamekye 88). This goes to say that in many African societies, addressing environmental issues is a collective effort. It's about the community coming together, inviting every voice to the table, and creating shared solutions.

This communal approach emphasises that sustainable living is not just a top-down directive; it's a shared journey that unites people in their care for the land. The African



perspective on ecology teaches us to appreciate the profound connections between humans and the environment. By valuing stewardship, sustainability, and community engagement, it offers invaluable lessons for how we can live in harmony with nature not just in Africa, but around the world.

Subsequently, recent studies including Ogundipe and Nwogbo (2020), and Thabo et al. (2021) have argued that African cultural festivals provide a great opportunity to show how culture and sustainability can go hand in hand. For example, Ogundipe and Nwogbo reveal that “many festivals in Africa use local materials and traditional crafts that reflect eco-conscious choices. They often feature costumes made with natural dyes and biodegradable items, which helps to reduce waste and supports local artisans” (112). By using these materials, festivals honour their cultural roots while also being mindful of their environmental impact. Similarly, events often become educational experiences where people learn about environmental issues. Thabo et al. (2021) attest to this claim that “festivals like the Makoma festival in Botswana weave in environmental themes. This includes hosting workshops and discussions about conservation and climate resilience, helping to connect cultural celebrations with important environmental messages” (Thabo et al. 85). These activities promote a sense of shared responsibility for taking care of the earth, making the festival experience more meaningful.

In conclusion, the way ecological design shows up in African cultural festivals highlights a powerful relationship between cultural identity and sustainability. These festivals use local materials, provide educational opportunities, and encourage community action all of which foster a greater awareness of environmental stewardship. Ogundipe and Nwogbo also suggest that “cultural festivals can be powerful catalysts for sustainable practices, marrying traditional knowledge with contemporary ecological challenges” (118). Therefore, these festivals are not just about celebrating heritage; they also represent a forward-looking approach to protecting our environment in today’s world with massive community involvement.

Indigenous Knowledge Designs and Cultural Festivals in Contextual Review

Scholars including Yirenkyi (2019), Ogundipe and Nwogbo (2020) and Izu (2024), among others have argued that cultural festivals serve as significant platforms for preserving and



transmitting indigenous knowledge, reinforcing communal bonds and fostering intergenerational learning. Through rituals, performances, and symbolic displays, these festivals encapsulate African cosmology, indigenous technologies, and traditional governance structures. In his words, Yirenkyi asserts that:

Ritual performative ceremonies play a key role in interpreting and understanding the African communal value systems. The various rituals and ceremonies in the African communal systems serve as a bond that keeps the people together and provides a kind of standardised way of living (27).

Going by the above, cultural festivals also showcase traditional leadership and community structures, highlighting traditional governance and social order. Buttressing this claim, Bonye, in his article titled *The Role of Traditional Festival in Action Planning, Advocacy and Social Accountability*, had earlier argued that festival in the contemporary African society “goes beyond the preservation and maintenance of tradition to create a platform or an opportunity where communities invite and engage dialogue with duty bearers through advocacy for development projects” (Bonye 33). He expresses further that “traditional authorities also use these forums to account to their people and also evaluate service providers on what they have been doing and what have been done so far in their communities” (Bonye 33).

Going by Bonye’s point of view, it is evident that many African festivals, such as the Olojo festival in Nigeria, where Ooni of Ile-Ife plays a leading role as a status symbol who embodies the spirit of the festival, and the Buganda Kingdom’s Kabaka’s birthday festival in Uganda, where King Kabaka plays a central figure role in educating and promoting awareness about specific health issues in Uganda, among other notable traditional festivals in Africa societies, provide a space where traditional rulers, chiefs, and elders assert their authority and reaffirm their roles as custodians of indigenous knowledge. The rituals and protocols observed during these festivals reflect pre-colonial governance structures, laws, and conflict resolution mechanisms, demonstrating how African societies maintain order and hierarchy through indigenous wisdom.



Indigenous knowledge is also evident in the artistic and performative elements of cultural festivals. Dance, music, masquerades, and visual art forms showcased in festivals like the Eyo festival in Lagos, Nigeria, and the Umhlanga Reed Dance festival in Eswatini embody sacred symbolism, spiritual meanings, and ancestral wisdom. As a matter of fact, “most African cultures use oral methods to educate and transfer knowledge to the next generation, often through musical games” (Joseph and Hartwig 8). Supporting Joseph and Hartwig’s statement, Westerlund puts forward that these “practices occur in social functions and ritual ceremonies where music is the main communication medium” (97). More so, traditional drumming patterns, call-and-response songs, and choreographed dances are often deeply tied to historical events, fertility rites, and communal celebrations. These artistic expressions serve as a bridge between the past and the present, ensuring that indigenous aesthetics and philosophies remain relevant in contemporary African societies.

Environmental stewardship is another critical aspect of indigenous knowledge systems reflected in African cultural festivals. Many indigenous festivals revolve around agricultural cycles, river deities, and sacred groves, emphasising traditional ecological knowledge. In their explication, Parrinder, Idowu, and Opokubelieve that indigenous environmental stewardship is, therefore, “embodied in the daily lives of the people and is guided and regulated by sets of norms which may be collectively regarded as African traditional religion”(5). Another area worthy of recognition in this ecological integration is that of the New Yam festival in Igbo communities of Nigeria. For instance, the festival is not just a celebration of agricultural abundance but also a demonstration of indigenous agricultural science, soil fertility practices, and the spiritual significance of yam cultivation. Similarly, the Maasai Moran initiation ceremonies in Kenya and Tanzania incorporate sustainable hunting and conservation ethics, reflecting a deep-seated indigenous understanding of biodiversity and ecological balance.

In the same vein, the spiritual and religious dimensions of indigenous knowledge are also central to African cultural festivals. Mbiti states that “Africans are notoriously religious” (2). Africans are so religious that certain signs on certain parts of the human body have serious religious interpretations. Many festivals are tied to ancestral worship, divination, and traditional



religious practices that predate colonial influences. The Ouidah Voodoo festival in Benin and the Dipo initiation festival in Ghana serve as sacred rites of passage that reinforce indigenous belief systems. These festivals provide an avenue for communities to connect with their spiritual roots, seek guidance from oracles, and perform rituals that strengthen their cultural heritage. Despite the influence of foreign religions, these indigenous festivals continue to thrive, demonstrating the resilience of African epistemologies in the face of external influences.

While cultural festivals play a crucial role in preserving indigenous knowledge systems, they also face challenges in the modern era. The forces of globalisation, urbanisation, and digitalisation have altered the dynamics of traditional festivals, leading to modifications in ritual practices and the commercialisation of indigenous expressions. However, many African societies are actively revitalising these festivals through cultural tourism, digital archiving, and collaborations with academic institutions. By integrating modern technology with indigenous wisdom, cultural festivals remain vibrant avenues for safeguarding African heritage, ensuring that indigenous knowledge systems continue to inform contemporary identity, governance, and artistic expression.

Conceptualising Cultural Promotion from the Global to Nigerian Perspectives

There is no gainsaying the fact that promoting African culture involves a wide range of activities that help preserve, share and develop the continent's rich cultural heritage. This includes traditional arts, music and literature, as well as modern expressions that celebrate African identities and histories. Thanks to globalisation and technology, African cultural promotion has gained momentum, sparking a cultural revival across the continent. Consequently, culture and values are fundamental to human society, and Africa is no exception. What sets humans apart is their unique capacity for culture and values, a defining characteristic of our species. Culture, as it is usually understood, entails a totality of traits and characters that are peculiar to a people to the extent that it marks them out from other peoples or societies (Idang, 98).

Moreover, institutions such as the African Union (AU) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) play significant roles in promoting



African culture. UNESCO's global initiative, the "Creative Cities of Music," has recognised cities such as Lagos and Accra for their rich musical heritage and promotion of local arts, providing these locales with international visibility and support (UNESCO). Such recognitions contribute not just to cultural pride but also to economic opportunities through tourism and cultural industries.

In the digital age, social media and platforms like YouTube and Instagram have transformed how African culture is disseminated and promoted. Artists and cultural entrepreneurs have leverage to reach global audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. For instance, the rise of Afrobeats, which combines traditional African music with contemporary elements, has gained international prominence, with artists like Burna Boy, Rema, Wizkid, Davido, Tems, Ayra Starr and Tiwa Savage, among others, crossing over into Western markets and continuing to push boundaries. As noted by Patricia:

With Nigerian Afrobeats artists commonly incorporating a mixture of their local languages and English into their songs, this music is resonating with the diaspora, regardless of location, enabling the listener to connect with the music on a deeper level. Understanding the fusion of the Nigerian culture and music where it continues to shape and redefine the global music landscape makes it a force to be reckoned with (p 5).

This democratisation of cultural sharing is reshaping narratives around Africa, presenting a more nuanced picture that contrasts with the traditional stereotypes.

Furthermore, the field of visual arts in Africa has also witnessed a renaissance, with contemporary artists gaining and pushing international boundaries. Institutions such as the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town are pivotal in this regard, providing spaces for African artists to exhibit their work and engage with local and global audiences. As curators like Koyo Kouoh argue, "these spaces not only promote artworks but also engage with the multifaceted histories and contemporary realities of the continent" (Kouoh 92). Such efforts contribute to a cultural ecosystem where the arts flourish and are valued for their contributions to national and regional identities.



It is necessary to reiterate here that promoting African culture is a vibrant and complex endeavour that combines traditional and modern elements, backed by local and international organisations. This approach not only preserves African culture but also revitalises it for future generations. The proliferation of digital media has increased accessibility and global exposure, allowing African stories to challenge entrenched stereotypes. As cultures continue to evolve, promoting African heritage remains crucial for creating a diverse, rich and inclusive global cultural landscape.

Foregrounding this claim, a diverse pool of different understandings and scholarly perspectives on cultural promotions and their essence in the cultural heritage conservation and preservation of African regions would lend more credence to these discussions. For instance, in **North Africa**, countries such as Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria promote culture by preserving ancient civilisations, Islamic heritage, and Berber traditions. “There is no community or nation in existence to which religion has not formed the basis of its life. There has always been a sense of belonging to God in Africa, as well as the basic belief that this world is God’s world” (Awoniyi4). Cultural landmarks like the Pyramids of Giza Egypt and the City of Carthage in Tunisia are central to global tourism, while festivals like the International festival of the Sahara in Tunisia highlight traditional music and folklore.

Similarly, West African nations, including Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Mali, are known for their vibrant cultural industries. Colin et. al. state that “West Africa is greatly diverse with a renowned rich cultural heritage” (31). Nigeria leads in film and music through Nollywood and Afrobeats, promoting African narratives globally. Ghana’s PANAFEST and Senegal’s Dak’Art Biennale are examples of continental platforms used to honour African history, arts, and resistance against colonialism. The story is not different in **East African** countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Tanzania where cultural promotion is used to foster national identity and social cohesion. Ethiopia celebrates its ancient Christian heritage and unique script, while Kenya promotes its diverse ethnic cultures through festivals, national museums, and tourism initiatives. The use of Swahili as a lingua franca in the region also promotes a shared cultural identity.



Furthermore, **Central African** countries such as Cameroon, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo focus on oral traditions, dance, and ancestral rites. Bishar emphasises that “Cameroon is a country in Central Africa with diverse natural and cultural resources. The country has several tourist attractions, including beaches, wildlife, cultural sites, and natural wonders”. (Bishar 3). Music genres like Soukous and traditional masquerades are vital to social and spiritual life. However, political instability and limited funding often hinder structured cultural promotion in this region. In **Southern Africa**, nations like South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Botswana actively promote multiculturalism and indigenous heritage. South Africa’s post-apartheid cultural policies support the arts, multilingual education, and the development of cultural villages. Reinforcing this, the *National Coat of Arms, Government of South Africa* asserts that:

Cultural festivals, African-cuisine projects, cultural villages, heritage routes and storytelling are areas that benefit from South Africa’s booming tourism industry. Many cultural villages have been established throughout South Africa to reflect the different cultures and traditions of the country’s people (26).

In a similar vein, Zimbabwe preserves its Shona and Ndebele traditions through festivals and crafts, while Namibia emphasises San and Himba heritage.

Going by the above submissions, it is believed that at the **continental level**, the African Union encourages cultural integration and preservation through the *Charter for African Cultural Renaissance* and its Agenda 2063 framework. Pan-African platforms like the All Africa Music Awards (AFRIMA) and institutions such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), promote cultural dialogue, research, and the celebration of African identity. In conclusion, while cultural promotion efforts vary from country to country, Africa as a whole is committed to preserving its diverse heritage. By investing in culture, education, and technology, African nations continue to showcase their unique identities while fostering continental unity and global recognition.

Theoretical Underpinning ‘Ecoscenography and Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS)’



This study is anchored in Tanja Beer's ecoscenography and Chikaireet al.'s indigenous knowledge system. Ecoscenography is a modern concept that combines environmental studies and focuses on how landscapes are represented and understood. This idea highlights the connection between nature, culture, and our ability to express ourselves. Tanja Beer's theory of ecoscenography reimagines the role of scenography in the 21st century by integrating ecological sustainability with creative stage design. In her explanation, "ecological thinking acknowledges that materiality and environments are mutually dependent in making beings, things and places – it recognises humans as part of nature's system, rather than a separate entity to use nature at its disposal" (Beer 3).

Going by Beer's submission, ecoscenography advocates for a holistic approach that goes beyond aesthetics, urging scenographers to consider environmental, social, and cultural sustainability in their work. Beer argues that "traditional scenography often results in excessive material waste and environmental harm" (25). She proposes a "shift toward regenerative design that minimises waste, reuses materials, and enhances ecological awareness in performance spaces" (Beer, *Ecoscenography: The Paradigm Shift* 25). However, Beer's ecoscenography is structured around five key canons that define its practice. These canons such as regenerative design, material circularity, collaborative ethics, site responsiveness and cultural sustainability offer a framework for applying sustainable design principles in festival performance contexts.

Regenerative Design

Regenerative design does more than just reduce damage; it helps bring life back to the environment. Beer (2018) explains that "ecoscenography should have a positive effect on nature by using natural elements like living plants and biodegradable materials in stage design" (Beer, *Sustainable Stages: Designing for the Future of Theatre* 45). Beer (2020) further discussed the examples of regenerative design in her *Ecoscenography: A Regenerative Approach*, for example, "performances that use vertical gardens, soil-based setups, or recycled wood structures follow this idea. This method connects with the larger environmental movement, which focuses on restoring nature" (Beer 28). It also fits well with efforts to make theatre and festival spaces more sustainable in their design and construction.



Material Circularity

One of the biggest problems in stage design is the amount of waste it creates. Many traditional stage sets are thrown away after a performance, adding to pollution. Ecoscenography supports material circularity, which means reusing, repurposing, and recycling stage materials. Beer (2021) suggests that “theatres and festivals should work with local craftspeople and eco-friendly suppliers to build a system where materials are continuously reused” (Beer, *Ecoscenography in Practice* 63).

Collaborative Ethics

Ecoscenography naturally brings together people from different fields, including artists, designers, environmental experts, and local communities. In 2021 Beers wrote that “true sustainability in stage design can only be achieved when all these groups work together, combining creativity with environmental knowledge” (Beer, *Ecoscenography in Practice* 94). This idea is especially important for festivals, where large teams create unique experiences in different locations.

Site Responsiveness

Festivals are often held in unusual places like parks, forests, or city spaces rather than traditional theatres. Ecoscenography follows the idea of site responsiveness, meaning the design should match and respect the environment instead of changing it. Beer (2021) explains that “stage designers should work with the natural surroundings, using the site’s natural textures, land shape, and materials in the performance design” (115). Osun Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage site is a testament to this theory.

Cultural Sustainability

Beer (2022) avers that “international festival culture sometimes leads to similar-looking stage designs, which can erase local artistic styles” (Beer, *Cultural Sustainability in Theatre Design*, 55). Ecoscenography encourages festival organisers to work with indigenous and local artists, using their knowledge and skills in stage design. Besides focusing on nature, ecoscenography also supports cultural sustainability, making sure that performance design respects and keeps local traditions, history, and identity alive.



Indigenous Knowledge System Theory (IKST)

This paper adopts the concept of the indigenous knowledge system by Chikaire et al. to interrogate the structuring, transmission, and application of indigenous knowledge systems in the Osun-Osogbo festival. Chikaire et al. in their contribution offer a pool of diverse perspectives on the understanding and definition of indigenous knowledge systems as held by various scholars within their respective subjects:

Indigenous knowledge system (IKS) refers to a body of empirical knowledge and beliefs handed down through generations of long-time inhabitants of a specific locale, by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings with each other and their environment (Warren, 1991; Johnson, 1992)...Indigenous knowledge encompasses spiritual relationships, relationships with the natural environment and the use of natural resources, relationships between people, and is reflected in language, social organisation, values, institutions and laws. These knowledge systems are usually embedded in naturalistic epistemologies and belief systems, which differ radically from those of scientific systems (IUCN, 1997) (Chikaire et al.202).

This may be the reason why Chikaire, et al. aver that “indigenous knowledge is local knowledge that is unique to a given culture acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments, and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture” (201). Daes qtd in Basttiste had earlier argued that indigenous knowledge comprises all knowledge about a particular people and its territory, the nature or use of which has been transmitted from generation to generation. This knowledge includes “all kinds of scientific, agricultural, technical and ecological knowledge, including cultigens, medicines and the rational use of flora and fauna” (Daes qtd in Battiste, 4).

Going by these submissions, it is pertinent to reiterate here that IKST refers to the unique knowledge, beliefs, and practices developed by communities over generations through interactions with their environment. It encompasses spiritual, social, and ecological relationships, reflecting the community’s values, institutions, and laws. As previously discussed in this paper,



the Osun Osogbo festival is a cultural and religious event that honours Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility, purity, and water. The festival embodies various aspects of IKST, including spirituality, environmental conservation, oral traditions, artistic expression, Yoruba cosmology, sacred ecology, and performative aesthetics to sustain and transmit indigenous knowledge.

Using IKST, we can examine how these knowledge systems are intentionally designed, structured, and passed down through generations using the following attendant features as underscored by Chikaire, et al.'s IKST:

- The placement of sacred ecology and natural environment in the indigenous knowledge design in the Osun Osogbo festival;
- The strategic functions of performative aesthetics such as ritual, dance, music, costume, and body adornment, among others in the festival;
- The relevance of cultural identity, spiritual and natural environment and their relationships in indigenous knowledge preservation, conservation and promotion;
- The impact of language as a medium of cultural transmission in the festival, and
- The contributory roles of values, institutions, and laws in the promotion of IKST in the Osun Osogbo festival.

Ecological Design in Osun Osogbo Festival in Nigeria (2024)

The connection between ecology and African cultural festivals is fascinating. These festivals are not just about celebration; they increasingly focus on being sustainable and environmentally friendly. Many communities are embracing eco-friendly practices that help raise awareness about the environment. While attempting to discuss the ecological aspect of the study, the Osun Osogbo festival (2024) will be our basis of interrogation as well as Tanja Beer's theory of an ecoscenography and Chikaireet. al.'s indigenous knowledge system as a framework. The Osun Osogbo festival happens every year to honour Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility and water. It takes place in the Osun Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The festival protects nature while also keeping cultural traditions alive. The Sacred Grove is cared for using local knowledge, ensuring the land stays healthy and full of life. Rituals like water purification

and offerings to the river strengthen the bond between people and nature, following regenerative design ideas. The picture below would be illustrative:



**Plate 1: A picture of the audience at the 2024 Osun Osogbo festival.
Photo Credit: Researcher.**

Regenerative design focuses on creating spaces that heal and improve the environment and society. Unlike sustainability, which reduces harm, regenerative design makes nature and communities stronger. The constant cleaning and monitoring of the grove is a pointer to this fact. The 2024 Osun Osogbo festival shows this idea through its deep link to nature, culture, and community. Artists use natural, biodegradable materials such as sand, mud, and wood, amongst others to make site-specific decorations that celebrate Yoruba culture without harming the environment. The community plays a big role, as local artists and spiritual leaders help keep the grove in proper condition. The grove is designed in such a way that it is eco-friendly and attractive for tourists, worshippers as well as indigenous members of the community. See the pictures below for details:



Plate 2: A picture of devotees' worship in the grove with ecological designs made of mud, trees, leaves and other biodegradable materials. Photo Credit: Researcher.



Plate 3: A picture of one of the ceramic designs of *Iyamopo* in the grove, made of soil, wood and other biodegradable materials. Photo Credit: Researcher.

In Tanja Beer's theory, the Osun Osogbo festival is a great example of regenerative design. It shows how performance spaces can become part of nature. By blending culture with care for the environment, the festival proves that theatre and nature can support each other. This

is capable of creating a point of attraction to viewers thereby contributing to its ecological design.

At the heart of Tanja Beer's ecoscenography is the idea of collaborative ethics, that is, the belief that art should be created through teamwork, respect, and shared responsibility. No single person should control the creative process; instead, different voices, including artists, local communities, and even nature, should be involved. The Osun Osogbo festival in 2024 is a perfect example of this spirit of collaboration. One of the custodians of the grove, Aluko Oluwatoyin Ademola made it clear to us that "the Osun Osogbo festival is organised and performed not only by the indigenes of Osun but also with the attendance of different government officials, kings from neighbouring states and towns. Different performances and dramatic enactments of songs, instrumental and acrobatic displays are performed by different groups of people". In the picture below, we can see the Osun devotees engaging in the process:



Plate 4: A picture of an Osun devotee performing music at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024).

Photo Credit: Researcher.

More so, every year, people gather in the Osun Sacred Grove to honour Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility and water. The festival is not just a performance; it is a collective effort. Priests, dancers, musicians, artists, and local residents work side by side to keep traditions alive while also protecting the sacred land. Ademola also makes it clear that: "the grove, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is cared for not by one person but by the entire community, showing deep

respect for both culture and nature”. No performance is complete without the collaboration and inclusion of the audience. The next picture reveals the audience who are present at the grove both from home and abroad:



Plate 5: A picture of the audience(s) from different parts of the world who are present at the Osun-Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Furthermore, everything at the festival from the vibrant costumes to the rhythmic drumming is made with locally sourced materials and skills passed down through generations. Rituals and performances are planned together, ensuring that everyone has a voice. Through this shared effort, the Osun Osogbo festival embodies collaborative ethics in ecoscenography. It reminds us that art, tradition, and nature thrive best when people come together with respect and purpose. The picture below will further buttress our explanation:



Plate 6: A picture of masqueraders who are also collaboratively involved in the ritual process at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Material circularity is a simple but powerful idea in Tanja Beer's ecoscenography. It means using materials in a way that reduces waste by reusing, recycling, or letting them return to nature safely. The Osun Osogbo festival in 2024 reflects this idea through its deep respect for the land and its natural resources. Tolu Oyeniyi, one of the custodians and staff of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, Osogbo, informed us that "many of the items used, such as costumes, decorations, and ritual objects are made from organic materials like fabric, cowries, wood, clay, and leaves. Instead of being thrown away, they either decompose naturally or are reused for future ceremonies". The picture below will attest to our claim:



Plate 7: A picture of worshippers of Osun, making use of dried leaves at the Osun-Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Local artisans and craftspeople help keep this tradition alive by making durable items that can be repurposed. Objects like calabashes, dried leaves woven cloth, and carved masks are passed down, reducing waste and preserving culture. Through this process, the Osun Osogbo festival shows how material circularity can create beautiful, meaningful, and eco-friendly celebrations. It reminds us that art and tradition can exist without harming the environment. The

statue of *Iya Ibeji* (mother of twins) and the stock of palm groves in the *Afin Akokoin* Osogbo (the first palace in Osogbo) below capture this fact:



Plate 8: A picture of *Iya Ibeji* at the *Afin Akoko* (first palace) in the OsunOsogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Site responsiveness is an important part of Tanja Beer's ecoscenography. It means designing events in a way that respects and connects with the space where they happen. Instead of changing the environment to fit the event, the event adapts to the environment. The Osun Osogbo festival in 2024 shows this clearly, as it is shaped by the Osun Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Oyeniya revealed that "every ritual, dance, and prayer happens naturally within the landscape. The paths, shrines, and gathering areas are not forced into the space, they rather follow the land's natural shape. The designs on the walls are not just ordinary but have a metaphorical meaning". Ademola also adds that "the wall displays a range of creatures and gods as inspired through dreams and designed by Susanne Wenger (1915-2009), an artist and Osun priestess. She transformed Osogbo into a hub of artistic and new ideas about contemporary African art".



Plate 9 and 10: A picture of a sculptor costumed with white fabric that signifies Osun (the river goddess) and the wall where the Osun Osogbo festival (2024) takes place. Photo

Credit: Researcher.

From observation, the costumes, decorations, and music reflect the environment. Many materials, like wood, clay, and leaves, come from the grove itself. The sounds of drums, singing, and chanting blend with the wind and the rustling trees, making nature part of the experience.



Plate 11: Pictures of royal dignitaries putting on white clothes at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Through site responsiveness, the Osun Osogbo festival honours both tradition and the land. It shows that culture and nature can exist together in harmony. Cultural sustainability is also an important idea in Tanja Beer's ecoscenography. It's about keeping cultural traditions alive for future generations, making sure they adapt and stay meaningful over time. The Osun Osogbo festival in 2024 is a perfect example as people still fetch water from the river for healing and ritual purposes. The pictures below are a testament to this fact:





Plate 12 and 13: Pictures of worshippers who are fetching water from the River Osun as well as another carrying a calabash at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Consequently, the festival, which remembers Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility and water, has been celebrated for centuries. It mixes ancient rituals, carrying of calabash containing a sacrifice, dances, fetching of the river water for healing and music, making sure the tradition stays fresh and vibrant. Similarly, local artisans keep the culture alive by using traditional methods to create costumes, masks, and crafts with materials from nature like cowries, calabash, and sea stones amongst others. The graphic illustration below attests to our position:



Plate 14: Pictures of worshippers carrying a calabash which is decorated with materials from nature, such as wool, sea stones, and cowries at the Osun Osogbo Festival (2024).

Photo Credit: Researcher.

One of the vibrant examples of this culture is the elaborate clothing of white material worn by worshippers for ages and the carrying of a calabash containing sacrifice. The community priests, dancers, musicians, and artists all come together to celebrate and share their heritage. Oyeniyi attests to this, through collaboration, the festival stays deeply connected to its roots but also embraces change, making sure it remains alive and relevant". There is also an evidenced cultural sustainability of participation and attendance. See the picture below for details:



Plate 15: A picture of massive attendance at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Going by the above, it is necessary to state here that cultural sustainability ensures the festival's long-term viability, preserving traditions, honouring the land, and incorporating indigenous knowledge for future generations. It is on this note that this paper will engage in the analysis of the Osun Osogbo festival using indigenous knowledge designs.

Indigenous Knowledge Designs in Osun Osogbo Festival in Nigeria (2024)

One of the key components of the Osun Osogbo festival is its relationship with the Osun Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Indigenous knowledge embedded in the festival promotes environmental sustainability through sacred ecology. In their postulation, Chikaire, et. al. highlight that indigenous knowledge is “unique to a given culture acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments, and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture” (201). This implies that knowledge systems are designed to harmonise human interactions with nature, and Osun Grove exemplifies this through its conservation practices. Rituals performed at the Osun River reinforce the Yoruba understanding of water as a spiritual medium and life-sustaining force, preserving ecological balance while ensuring cultural continuity. The Iyamopo, Sanpona and Ella below will support our position on how indigenous design promotes cultural heritage:



Plate 16: Iyamopo picture at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher.

Iyamopo is the tallest among the sculptures. It has six hands –“some symbolically offering advice and others inflicting the consequences of either heeding or ignoring that advice” (Ademola 2024). This imagery reflects the Yoruba belief in the dual nature of guidance and retribution, reinforcing moral consciousness and divine justice.



Plate 17: Sanpona and Ellapicture at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024).

Photo Credit: Researcher.

The image contains Sanpona and Ella, both significant spiritual entities in Yoruba belief. *Sanpona* is associated with smallpox and divine retribution, signifying the power of deities to control health and well-being, while *Ella* represents balance and protection. Their sculptural representation within the grove highlights Yoruba indigenous knowledge about disease, healing, and spiritual equilibrium. In addition, the Osun Grove, is a preserved natural sanctuary that symbolises the indigenous respect for the environment. The festival includes offerings made from natural resources such as water from the sacred Osun River, leaves, herbs, and local agricultural produce, demonstrating sustainable use of the environment. This canon reflects the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, and the understanding that nature is both a spiritual and physical resource.

Performative Aesthetics: Rituals, Dance, and Symbolism

The image below presents a sculptural relief depicting the drummers and Layewu masquerade, designed for audience attraction and engagement. The figures appear engaged in ceremonies, playing musical instruments and performing sacred movements. This aligns with IKDT, which encodes history and spirituality in performative arts. The festival's drumming, chants, and dance serve as oral archives of ancestral knowledge, reinforcing Yoruba identity and cosmology. The presence of the *Layewu* masquerade exemplifies the role of spectacle in

indigenous ritual, where “performance becomes both an act of devotion and a means of communal participation”, Oyeniya said. The picture below will be instructional:



Plate 18: The Drummers and Layewumasquerade picture on the wall of the grove at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Source: Photo Credit: Researcher.

Costume, Body Adornment, and Cultural Identity

IKDT also focuses on the symbolic design of indigenous attire and adornments. The festival’s traditional costumes are not just aesthetic choices but coded expressions of cultural identity and spirituality: The white garments worn by Osun priestesses symbolise purity, divinity, and ancestral connection. Beaded regalia and sculptural headpieces serve as markers of social status and spiritual authority. The body paintings and scarifications seen on devotees represent sacred symbols that align with Yoruba metaphysics. See the pictures below for additional information:



Plate 19: *Arugba* acolytes' picture at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Researcher and Gettyimage.co.uk

Additionally, the elaborate beaded crowns and traditional white attire of the participants signify social status and spiritual hierarchy. The beaded regalia denote sacred authority, while the white garments worn by devotees and priestesses embody purity and divine connection. The sculptural headpieces, adorned with cowries and intricate beadwork, function as cultural texts, symbolising ancestral lineage and spiritual protection. This aligns with IKS's emphasis on attire as a coded expression of identity, linking the present to the ancestral past. This further stresses the concept of holism in the IKS as indigenous knowledge integrates various aspects of life, including spirituality, environment, and social structures. The Osun Osogbo festival reflects this by blending rituals, ecological conservation, and artistic performances into a unified experience.

Furthermore, the Osun Osogbo festival is fundamentally rooted in the spiritual bond between the people of Osogbo and the goddess Osun, a revered deity of fertility, love, and protection. This relationship is expressed through rituals such as the Ibori cleansing, prayers at the Osun Sacred Grove, and the procession led by the Arugba (virgin girl carrying the sacrificial items). The spiritual canon emphasises the belief in divine guidance and intervention, and how the ancestors and deities interact with the living to ensure communal well-being. Moreover, the

Osun Osogbo festival fosters unity and reinforces communal bonds. Traditional institutions such as the Ataoja (king), chiefs, priestesses, and cultural guilds (like drummers and masqueraders) play specific roles, highlighting the structured hierarchy and communal responsibilities within Yoruba society. Participation cuts across age, gender, and social class, reinforcing social cohesion and identity. The pictures below will attest to this fact:



Plate 20: Arugba picture at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024). Photo Credit: Gettyimage.co.uk

The above image captures a moment from the Osun Osogbo procession, highlighting the Arugba, a central figure in the festival. The Arugba, a virgin girl chosen for her purity, carries the sacrificial calabash in a choreographed movement that aligns with Yoruba cosmology. Her presence symbolises renewal, sacrifice, and divine intercession.

Language, Institutions, and Laws as a Medium of Cultural Transmission

The use of the Yoruba language during the rituals, chants, songs, proverbs, and oral performances during the festival is a vital aspect of indigenous knowledge systems. Through storytelling, incantations, and praise-singing, cultural values and historical memory are preserved and passed down. This canon emphasises the importance of indigenous languages in maintaining

and transmitting cultural identity. More so, the festival enshrines moral values such as chastity (through the role of the Arugba), respect for elders and deities, hospitality, and reverence for tradition. Indigenous institutions such as the Osun priesthood and the Osogbo palace council play regulatory and spiritual roles in the festival's organisation. These institutions uphold customary laws and practices that guide societal conduct and cultural continuity. The pictures below are a testament to this claim:



Plate 21: Arugba, drummers, and chanters at the Osun Osogbo festival (2024) guided by both military and paramilitary of Nigerian security forces.

Photo Credit: Researcher

Above all, these images encapsulate the essence of the Osun Osogbo festival as a convergence of sacred ecology, performative aesthetics, and cultural identity. Iyamopo, Sanpona and Ella, the drummers, Layewu masquerade, and the Arugba each serve as cultural markers, reinforcing Yoruba spirituality, moral philosophy, and environmental consciousness. These elements illustrate how indigenous knowledge systems ensure the continuity of Yoruba heritage while fostering environmental and spiritual sustainability. By applying indigenous knowledge design theory, the Osun Osogbo festival is revealed as a well-structured indigenous knowledge system that preserves Yoruba cosmology, environmental ethics, performative aesthetics, and



spiritual technology. The festival's rituals, artefacts, and artistic expressions are intentional knowledge designs that ensure cultural sustainability. Therefore, the festival remains a living archive of Yoruba indigenous wisdom, reinforcing the relevance of IKS in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Having discussed the functional essence of ecological designs and indigenous knowledge systems in the preservation, conservation, revitalisation and promotion of cultural heritage in the indigenous festivals using Osun Osogbo as a paradigm. It is pertinent to state without any equivocation that ecological designs and indigenous knowledge systems played a pivotal role in all aspects of indigenous festivals and their significance cannot be relegated to the backdrop. By looking closely at the festival's role in promoting environmental stewardship, we can appreciate the rich tapestry of life that surrounds us and consider how best to protect it for generations to come. It is discovered in this study that indigenous knowledge designs and community-led innovations offer valuable insights into sustainable and culturally sensitive initiatives that prioritise the promotion of cultural festivals in the community. It is, therefore, recommended that ecological designs and indigenous knowledge systems should be given considerable attention in cultural promotion and transition.

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