Eco-Tourism and Sustainable Development
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Exploring Heritage Resources for Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism Development in Nanka, Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing recognition of cultural heritage as a catalyst for sustainable tourism in Nigeria, rural communities like Nanka that possess unique heritage assets remain underexplored in academic literature and policy frameworks. This study addresses the research gap by conducting an ethnographic assessment of Nanka's tangible and intangible heritage resources, with the aim of evaluating their potential for sustainable cultural heritage tourism development. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, field observations and visits to traditional sites, with key twelve (12) informants including community elders, custodians of deities and traditional leaders. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select the respondents. Findings reveal a rich tapestry of heritage assets, including sacred rivers, ancestral deities, festivals, traditional title systems, and marriage customs, which collectively embody the cultural identity of the Nanka people. These resources, if appropriately conserved and promoted, could serve as powerful tools for tourism-driven rural development, community empowerment, and cultural preservation. The study contributes practically by proposing a community-led tourism development framework that integrates indigenous knowledge systems with modern heritage management strategies. This research also contributes to academic discourse by offering a culturally grounded

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ARTICLE INFO
Received: 15 January 2025 | Revised: 3 March 2025 | Accepted: 10 March 2025 | Published Online: 18 March 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.63385/etsd.v1i1.157

CITATION
Ejikeme, J.N.U., Mmadu, E.C., 2025. Exploring Heritage Resources for Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism Development in Nanka, Orumba North Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. Eco-Tourism and Sustainable Development. 1(1): 42–65. DOI: https://doi.org/10.63385/etsd.v1i1.157

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model for heritage resource assessment and its application in tourism planning.

Keywords: Heritage Resources; Tourism Growth; Heritage Resources; Sustainable Tourism; Nanka

1. Introduction

Heritage resources, including cultural, historical, and natural elements, are crucial for preserving a community's identity, promoting tourism, and fostering economic development. Nanka, Nigeria's Orumba North Local Government Area, has untapped heritage resources for tourism growth, presenting opportunities to promote sustainable development, cultural pride, and local livelihoods. Tourists visit cultural and historical resources in the rapidly growing tourism industry, seeking unique cultures and experiences. Nanka offers both tangible and intangible heritage resources. Ezenagu [1] notes that such experience could not have been possible without tourism. Heritage tourism, particularly in developing nations, is rapidly growing and is seen as a crucial tool for poverty alleviation and community economic development [2]. Heritage tourism uses both tangible and intangible aspects of culture, including living and built elements, as a tourism resource, encompassing existing cultures, immaterial heritage elements, and material vestiges of the built cultural environment [3]. Heritage tourism connects past and present, promoting cultural preservation, economic empowerment, job creation, infrastructure development, and community engagement while preserving cultural and natural assets.

Heritage tourism, a crucial intersection of heritage and tourism, is underutilized in area like Nanka due to infrastructure issues, lack of promotion, and environmental threats. Nanka's heritage resources, cultural practices, and natural attractions are at risk of being forgotten or degraded due to neglect, inadequate awareness, and growing religious intolerance. Christianity often misunderstands African Traditional Religion (ATR) as pagan or fetishistic, leading to a culture of rejection, destruction and condemnation of traditional heritage. Heritage resources offer tangible evidence of past human activities, revealing secrets about present identity and preserving cultural narratives for future generations. Limited research on Nanka's heritage resources and their potential contribution to tourism development underscores the need for a comprehensive study to identify and evaluate these resources. This study aims to identify and document Nanka's heritage resources, and assess their culturally sensitive and sustainable potential for tourism development. The study underscores the potential of Nanka's heritage resources in boosting tourism and economic growth, offering valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders in sustainable tourism development. The study enhances Nigeria's heritage tourism discourse by providing a practical framework for rural communities, aiming to reposition Nanka as a viable destination for cultural pride and economic resilience.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research design with ethnographic approach to explore the tangible and intangible heritage resources of Nanka community and their relevance to sustainable cultural heritage tourism development. Data collection involved triangulation of multiple qualitative methods, including: In-depth interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), field observations and visits to shrines, rivers, and traditional sites. FGDs provided collective insights into how different demographic groups perceive heritage values and tourism potential. The FGD was held at the playground of Ududonka Shrine. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held, which was segmented by age (elders, youth) and gender to explore collective memory, gendered practices, and intergenerational perspectives on heritage protection and tourism potential.

The FGD had one panel divided by a 15 min break. There were 12 participants in a panel. The interview process also had twelve (12) key respondents. The participants include community elders, custodians of deities, traditional leaders (Nze and Ozo title holders), women leaders (*Umuada*) and youth leaders. All interview and FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated where necessary from the Igbo language into English. Field notes and observational journals were systematically reviewed. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select key informants who possess deep knowledge of the community's heritage resources based on recommendations by

community members and due to their age and status. The research aimed to capture local voices and perspectives on the meaning, function, and tourism potential of their cultural practices. The diversity of respondents ensures a holistic view of heritage perspectives, and thematic saturation was reached by all the twelve participants (see **Table 1**). Field observations and field visits to shrines, rivers, and traditional sites were done, which was documented using field notes, photographs, and audio recordings. The study was conducted in Nanka community, Anambra State, in September, 2024. The secondary data comprised a review of existing literature relevant to heritage tourism and development in Nigeria. This included scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government publications, and policy reports. Responses were coded and organized into key themes, such as cultural and spiritual significance, indigenous ecological knowledge, community perceptions of tourism development and implications of Nanka heritage resources for sustainable heritage-based tourism development. Observational data and photographs were triangulated with interview responses for richer interpretation, ensuring the reliability. The study adhered to ethical research standards. All participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the research and assured their rights to withdraw at any time point without consequence. The researchers provided verbal consent to the participants before any data collection took place. Participants' identities were anonymized, and their responses were used strictly for research purposes. The study was also conducted with cultural sensitivity, ensuring that local customs and sacred traditions were respected and that no fieldwork activities disrupted community life or infringed upon sacred spaces.

Table 1. Sample Composition and Size Justification.

Category	Number	Description
Traditional leaders	2	Ozo titleholders
Deity priests/shrine keepers	3	Custodians of sacred rivers and groves
Elders(over 65)	3	Holders of oral histories and rituals
women leaders(Umuada)	2	Representing female cultural roles
Youth representatives	2	Provide intergenerational perspectives
Focus Group Participants	12	Involvement of all the interviewee
Total	12	

3. Literature Review

3.1. Conceptual Framework: Defining Heritage Resources and Tourism Growth

Heritage resources are the cultural, historical, and natural assets that embody the identity, values, and traditions of a community. According to UNESCO World Heritage Centre[4], 'heritage is our legacy from all historical periods that we live with today and what we pass on to future generations. They are our touch stones, our points of reference, our identity. Cultural heritage refers to the creative or symbolic resources passed down through generations, providing recognized qualities and enriching cultural identities in each civilization[5]. Ezenagu[1] emphasizes heritage resources as a source of cultural identity, driving economic development, strengthening cultural identity, and attracting visitors for sustainable development. The continuous and progressive development of tourism industry, considering its past, present and future impacts on global agenda places it as one of the best sectors of investment[6]. For example, Caribbean tourism economics shows in 2005 the Caribbean received 22.5 million stay-over arrivals, 19.8 million cruise-ship passengers visits and 21.5 billion in expenditure. McKercher & Du Cros (2002) emphasize heritage tourism's key attributes: sites must be known beyond local communities, attractions should offer unique experiences, and be robust and manage carrying capacity. Graham & Howard[7] define heritage as a combination of natural and cultural settings, including landscapes, historic sites, architecture, biodiversity, and knowledge, and tourism. On one hand heritage resources promotes tourism development and tourism on the other showcases and preserves a people's heritage[8]. The intent of tourism is to pique people's curiosity.

Tourism encompasses various activities, services, and industries, including transportation, accommodation, dining, retail, and entertainment, for individuals or groups moving away from home, promoting social, cultural, and economic

growth[9]. Cultural heritage tourism, focusing on visual and performing arts, heritage buildings, landscapes, and unique lifestyles, is a significant industry force, fostering genuine cultural experiences[10]. The conservation of cultural heritage is a good opportunity to build the environment and communities in the developing countries[11]. Sustainable tourism development requires a steady-state economic perspective that acknowledges the dependency of economic development, including tourism, on natural capital stock[12]. Heritage resources comprise tangible, intangible, natural and cultural. Tangible heritage encompasses historical, cultural, or architectural objects, sites, and structures, such as historical landmarks, ancient shrines, and artifacts in Nanka. Intangible heritage encompasses traditions, practices, knowledge, and expressions passed down through generations. These include festivals, oral traditions, music, dance, and indigenous crafts. Natural heritage encompasses landscapes, geological formations, and ecosystems with aesthetic, cultural, or ecological significance, attracting ecotourism and adventure tourism, requiring preservation for ecological balance. This encompasses the tangible and intangible elements created by humans and associated with their culture.

3.2. The Role of Heritage Tourism in Economic Development

Traveling for the purpose of experiencing distinct cultures or heritage relics has traditionally been one of the major reasons for people to travel. Heritage tourism, a part of the broader category of cultural tourism, has become an important sector in tourism, which contributes to economic development by creating jobs, generating income, and stimulating investment in infrastructure and services.

The importance of culture in tourism is best illustrated in the following statements:

> "We need to think about cultural tourism because really there is no other kind of tourism. It is what tourism is... People don't come to America for our airports, people don't come to America for our hotels, or the recreation facilities. They come for our culture – they come here to see America"[13].

> "Memory is vital to creativity: that holds true for individuals and for peoples, who find in their heritage - natural and cultural, tangible and intangible - the key to their identity and the source of their inspiration"[14].

Mc kercher & Du Cros (2002) emphasize heritage tourism's key attributes: sites must be known beyond local communities, attractions should offer unique experiences, and be robust and manage carrying capacity. Attractions should be accessible, compelling, and preserve both tangible and intangible heritage assets to attract and retain tourists. Heritage tourism boosts local economies by spending on accommodation, transportation, food, and souvenirs, promoting community revitalization and cultural preservation, especially in rural areas like Nanka.

People visiting cultural and historical resources is one of the largest, most pervasive and fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry today[3]. Heritage tourism preserves living culture, history, and natural environments, focusing on landscapes, arts, lifestyles, values, traditions, and events, influencing economic development and promoting present-future growth stability[15]. More importantly, these unique elements characterize the community and through this characterization, it draws community and visitors alike[16]. This facilities harmony and understanding among people, it supports culture and helps renew tourism[17]. Heritage tourism is primarily characterized by cultural exchanges between diverse nationalities, which can foster global harmony and peace[18]. Heritage tourism sustainable management aims to strike a balance between preserving heritage resources and fostering economic development for the community[16]. Culture and heritage tourism involves visiting sites that celebrate an area's history, identity, or inheritance, categorized into natural, cultural, and built attractions[19]. Heritage tourism success relies on effective management of heritage resources and policy implementation, considering local residents' attitudes and involvement in heritage site development[20]. The UN World Tourism Organization defines cultural heritage tourism as a tourism activity where visitors learn, discover, experience, and consume tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products in a destination[21]. Community involvement is crucial for sustainable development, balancing economic prosperity, environmental protection, social equity, and business opportunities, and is essential for achieving sustainable development[22, 23]. Touristic attractiveness is often considered a strategic territorial resource for economic

returns, linked to natural landscapes, urban agglomerations, coasts, waterfronts, and heritage sites [24]. Heritage tourism presents a promising opportunity for local development by generating funds for the preservation and conservation of significant cultural pieces through tourism.

Heritage tourism, a sustainable approach to regional development, can effectively value and appreciate important immaterial local characteristics, as cultural heritage is deeply rooted in the territory [24]. According to Michelson and Paadam, [25], heritage is sold as a tourist product focusing on the socio-cultural assets. Heritage is defined as a resource that is indirectly created by groups or settlements [26]. China's cultural tourism industry attracts millions of tourists annually, offering a variety of experiences from ancient temples and palaces to contemporary museums and galleries [26]. China's cultural sites like the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Terracotta Warriors, and Temple of Heaven attract tourists for traditional arts and crafts [27]. The European Commission highlights that while tourism promotes cultural heritage, it also poses challenges like congestion, overcrowding, loss of authenticity, and cultural appropriation [24]. The European Commission Framework prioritizes sustainability in cultural heritage, focusing on regeneration, adaptive re-use, and balancing access with sustainable tourism and natural heritage [24]. Traditional economic theory suggests that cultural heritage enhances employment, human and social capital, and upholds sustainability principles [28].

The Sustainable Development Goals acknowledge culture's role in driving and enabling sustainable development, with tourism in Namibia being a significant job creator and valuable foreign exchange earner [29]. Namibia's rural development faces challenges due to cultural and heritage resource inadequacies, affecting cultural identity and indigenous population's tourism potential. Addressing policy gaps could help rebuild and sustain sustainable development [29]. Namibia's strategy suggests proactive measures to tackle challenges, with tourism linked to economic growth, but a clearer link between poverty reduction, socio-economic equality, and youth involvement. Heritage tourism appreciates the cultural aspects of a destination, including its history, architecture, traditions, arts, crafts, and social practices, fostering identity and authenticity [29]. The UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 2003 defines intangible cultural heritage as living expressions inherited from ancestors, including oral traditions, performing arts, rituals, and craft skills, while tangible cultural heritage includes immovable and movable artifacts and natural sites [19]. Heritage management improves social inclusion, intercultural dialogue, territorial identity, environmental quality, social cohesion, tourism development, job creation, investment climate, and generates social benefits and economic growth through numerous case studies [30]. Cultural and heritage tourism has potential for national development, but challenges include inadequate infrastructure, information generation, technical skills, resource disputes, and marketing to attract private sector involvement [29].

Namibia's Twyfelfontein and Namib Sand Sea World Heritage Sites are globally significant and attract tourism, with Namib Naukluft Park being the only coastal desert with extensive dune fields [29]. Namibia's tourism industry aims to be a model for biodiversity conservation, environmental management, and sustainable tourism development, fostering rural development and economic growth through innovative partnerships. Tourism in Namibia contributes around US$447.9 million, which represents 3.2 percent share of GDP and creates an estimated 41, 200 jobs representing 5.3 percent of total employment. In 1996, Namibia implemented Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), a key intervention focusing on rural communities, promoting sustainable use of natural resources and involving local, regional, national, and international actors in resource use [31]. Lalibela, a top tourist destination in Ethiopia, offers clean, welcoming hotels strategically located near main attractions like monolithic churches and stunning views of the Lalibela Mountains, making it a popular tourist destination. Hotels in Lalibela are often located near restaurants, artisan shops, and bars, with approximately 30 famous hotels listed as tourist destination sites [9]. China's cultural richness and historical significance are driving growth in heritage and cultural tourism, with local communities marketing their unique heritage and culture for tourism [26]. Major heritage attractions like the Great Wall of China have led to extensive infrastructure development, but less known attractions still lack sufficient support [32]. A good example is the city of Kashgar, a key attraction in the Silk Road beltways of China (Szadziewski, Mostafanezhad & Murton, 2022). Kashgar faces challenges due to a lack of comprehensive logistical support, including paved roads, public transportation, hotels, and tourism infrastructure [33]. Adetola et al's study on

Nigerian heritage sites suggests policy review for improved preservation and promotion, highlighting the need for revision of objectives and effective enforcement measures to boost economic growth and cultural heritage preservation [34].

3.3. Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Tourism

Cultural heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible elements that embody the identity, memory, and creativity of communities. These include sacred sites, oral traditions, rituals, traditional ecological knowledge, and religious beliefs passed down through generations [35]. Recent studies stress the need for integrating heritage conservation with sustainable tourism practices, especially in local and indigenous communities. In developing contexts, heritage-based tourism serves as a tool for poverty alleviation, identity preservation, and environmental awareness [36]. According to Butler [37], sustainable tourism models must strike a balance between economic benefits and cultural preservation, particularly in rural or indigenous communities where heritage forms the bedrock of identity. Sustainability involves integrating economic, social, and environmental factors for progress and improved well-being, as the desired quality of life is now intertwined with social and ecological sustainability. Community-led sustainable tourism involves local residents shaping initiatives to promote environmental stewardship, enhance economies, preserve cultural heritage, and align tourism development with local values, resulting in long-term benefits for both communities and destinations [38]. Nanka's heritage sites, including deity shrines and ritual rivers, offer cultural and ecotourism growth in Nigeria, but are under-documented due to modernization, environmental degradation, and cultural neglect. Studies emphasize the importance of community involvement, environmental ethics, and respect for spiritual significance in transforming heritage resources into viable tourism products [39]. This aligns with the call for models that balance economic benefits with cultural preservation and ecological stewardship [40]. Ethnography aids in understanding cultural heritage perspectives, particularly in African contexts, by providing a grounded approach to understanding indigenous religious systems and their conservation value [41]. For example, Iroegbu and Ugwueze [42] emphasize that community-based rituals, such as those performed at deity shrines, serve as both spiritual practices and heritage expressions that can be sustainably harnessed through respectful tourism programming. In Southeast Nigeria, community elders, deity priests, and women leaders preserve generational knowledge of sacred sites, making them central informants in any tourism planning. Ethnographic assessments in places like the Nsukka and Idemili regions have revealed complex social values linked to deity worship and sacred water bodies [43], which parallels the situation in Nanka.

Participatory tourism empowers communities to protect their identity, benefit economically from visitor interest, manage resources, and make decisions for present generation without compromising future organizational structure [44] Nanka communities, with their deities connected to rivers and groves, offer a unique case for incorporating cultural and environmental conservation into tourism strategies. As Owusu and Boateng [45] note, that models of eco-spiritual tourism that appeal to both pilgrims and environmentalists can be built around sacred natural systems. Community engagement is crucial for successful cultural heritage tourism initiatives, ensuring local voices shape development, maintaining cultural integrity, and equitable benefit sharing, as demonstrated in Nigeria [44]. Nanka's cultural custodians, including priests, elders, and youth leaders, hold valuable knowledge and authority over heritage spaces. As such, any sustainable tourism development in the area must prioritize inclusive, culturally sensitive approaches rooted in local values and indigenous governance systems.

In the dynamically evolving discipline of cultural heritage tourism, recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the integration of intangible heritage and sacred ecological systems into sustainable tourism planning [46, 47]. Studies in Nigeria have explored community-based tourism in well-known heritage clusters such as Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove and the Sukur Cultural Landscape [1, 48], yet the lesser-known rural communities with equally rich cultural capital such as Nanka remain largely absent from academic and policy discourse.

3.4. Gaps in Literature and the Need for Place-Based Ethnographic Research

Although there is growing recognition of the role of heritage in sustainable tourism, existing literature often overlooks micro-level ethnographic case studies of lesser-known

communities like Nanka. Much of the available research focuses on national heritage monuments, leaving out localized, community-based sacred sites that offer equally rich tourism potential [49]. Despite the global rise of heritage tourism, most policies in sub-Saharan Africa still prioritize built monuments over living heritage systems. Culture is the cornerstone for accomplishing sustainable tourism research and practice goals in many domains. Culture has received very little attention despite being the deeply rooted and reliable framework for human existence [50]. This study responds to this gap by offering an in-depth, place-specific assessment of heritage resources in Nanka using ethnographic methods. It aims to build a grounded understanding of how cultural and spiritual heritage can inform sustainable tourism planning in Southeastern Nigeria.

3.5. Study Area

Nanka, a rural community in Orumba North L. G. A., Anambra State, Nigeria (See **Figures 1** and **2**), is attracting significant potential for heritage tourism due to its unique blend of natural and cultural assets. The Nanka community consists of seven villages: Ifite, Agbiligba, Enugwu, Umudala, Eti, Amako, and Ubahu. Nanka shares boundaries with Oko, Agulu, Ekwuluobia, Aguluzigbo, Isuofia, Umuona, and Awgbu and is situated about six miles north of Ekwuluobia, with geographical coordinates of 6.037° N, 7.077° E. Nanka is an autonomous community founded by Dinne bu Ududo, who migrated from Ohafia, now Abia State, and settled in Nanka. According to Dominic Ezenachukwu (personal communication, September 13, 2024), Dinne bu Ududo, a 70-year-old Ozo-titled man from Obeagu, settled in Nanka after years of wandering, aligning with Chief Alexander Ezeugwua's final words, "Na-nkea". However, a 90-year-old farmer and customary court judge, Ezenwankwo Ezekeke from Umueze Ubahu village, interprets Nanka as "we are more than complete" (Nanka zulu ezu welu ka), explaining that the people were not slaves. The meaning of Nanka, a spirit believed to be the greatest, is debated. Dinne bu Ududo, who migrated from Ohafia, is considered the progenitor. Nanka is believed to have had three wives, each bearing two sons, resulting in six sons in total. Nanka, Nigeria, boasts several tropical rainforest-type markets like Afor Udo, Eke Ntai, and Oye Udo, despite extensive deforestation due to land use for roads, homes, and buildings. The rich soil in Nanka supports agriculture, and many part of the area cultivated crops like yam (ji) *Dioscorea spp*, cassava (akpu) *Manihot esculenta*, Maize (oka) *Zea* mays. Some of the economic trees found in Nanka includes avocado pear (ube oyibo) *Pearse americana,* palm tree (nkwu) *Elaeis guineensis*. Kola nut (oji igbo) *kola acuminate.* Orange tree (oroma) *Citrus spp,* mango tree (*Manginefera indica*), guava (*Psidium guajava*), plaintain (ojoko) *Musa paradisiaca,* pawpaw (*Carica papaya*). Some of the vegetables that are being cultivated by Nanka people includes scentleaf (nchanwu) *Ocimum gratissimum*, waterleaf (*Talinum triangulare*), bitterleaf (onugbu) *Vernonia amygdalina.* The Nanka people, primarily farmers, rely on plants and animals for income and sustenance. They domesticated or farmed goat (ewu) *Cpris,* indigenous chickens (okuko Igbo), *Galus galus demesticas,* and sheep (aturu) *Vix*. They cultivate palm oil, engage in barter trade, and engage in pottery, basketry, and blacksmithing. The community is known for its vibrant markets, with Eke being the main market.

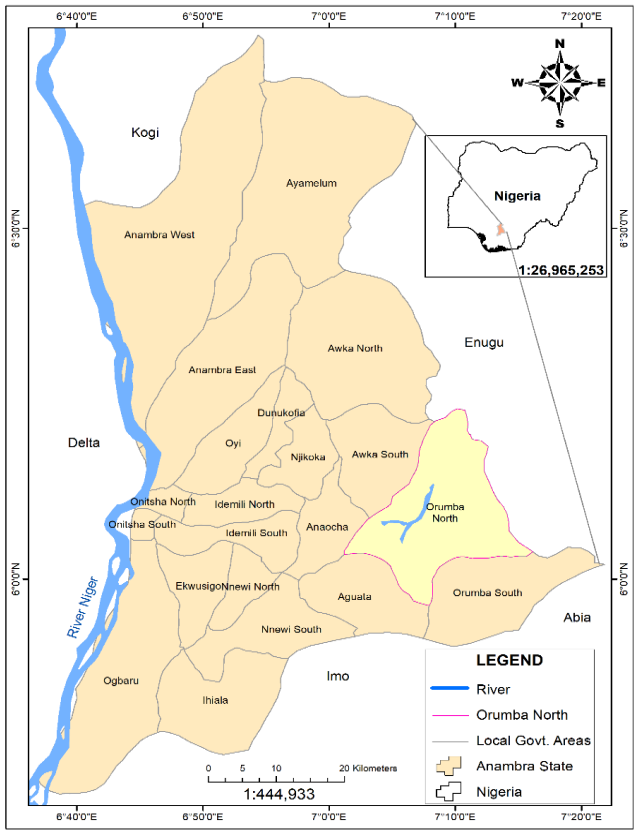


Figure 1. Map of Anambra State Showing Orumba North Local Government Area.

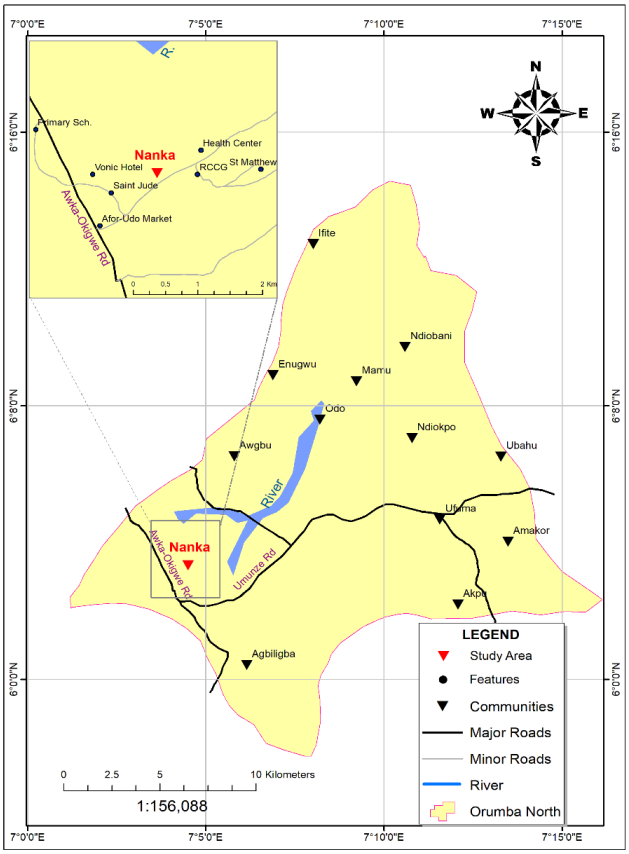


Figure 2. Map of Orumba North Local Government Area Showing study Area.

4. Results

4.1. Identification of Heritage Resources in Nanka

Nanka has tangible and intangible heritage resources. Tangible resources include shrines/deities like Ududonka and its associated 14 deities with sacred rivers, rivers like Attama and Nwankwo Okli, while intangible heritage resources are festivals, burial rites, marriage ceremonies, and Ozo title taking.

Tangible Heritage Resources

Nanka has a rich heritage, including tangible elements like sacred shrines and rivers, and intangible aspects like festivals, burial rites and traditional ceremonies. The Ududonka Shrine is the most prominent, serving as the spiritual epicenter and a key part of the community's identity, cosmology, and traditions. These sites are deeply embedded in the Nanka culture.

Shrines

Ududonka Shrine: The Ududonka Shrine holds a central and unifying position among the seven communities that make up Nanka (see **Figure 3**). According to field data obtained during an in-depth interview with the Chief Priest referred to as *Aka Ji Ofor*, meaning "holder of the staff of authority" or "general overseer" of the Ududonka shrine, Mr. Emeka Mgbe (interview conducted at Ududonka Shrine, 13th September 2024), the origins of the shrine can be traced as far back as the 19th century. The shrine, initially belonging to the Umuoba Ezeanyisi family, was recognized by Igwe Okoli, the reigning monarch, as a communal religious site with spiritual and cultural significance. The Ududonka shrine, a central worship site for seven Nanka communities, symbolizes unity and cultural heritage. According to local oral tradition, Ududonka arrived in human form, actively seeking a place to settle within the area.



Figure 3. House view of Ududonka.

Another informant added that Ududonka, after traversing various locations, was granted land in Enugwu Nanka, his permanent spiritual abode, showcasing the shrine's deep mythological roots and divinely chosen sacred geography. The Nanka community strategically established representations of the Ududonka deity in external communities to make spiritual services more accessible to a broader audience, overcoming long-distance travel challenges (Mr Ikechukwu

Mbakwe, pers. Comm., 13th September, 2024). Ududonka shrines in towns like Oko, Igboukwu, Agulu, and Ekwulobia maintain symbolic and spiritual links to the original shrine, ensuring continuity in ritual practices and cultural diffusion. The cultural landscape, based on shared beliefs, can be utilized as a regional heritage tourism network, connecting Nanka with its spiritual affiliates in Anambra State. The Ududonka deity is part of a dynamic family structure in Nanka cosmology, including his wife Udo, son Ngene, and daughter Ogwugwu, who form the core of a complex pantheon of sub-deities.

During the fieldwork, one of Ududonka shrine keepers (Mr. Kenneth Mmuogbo at Ududonka shrine, 13th September, 2024) offered profound insights into the nature and significance of the deities associated with the Ududonka shrine. These deities, considered offspring of Ududonka, are deeply integrated into the cultural and social framework of Nanka and its surrounding communities. Based on Mr. Emeka Mgbe's testimony, Ududonka is associated with many rivers, each linked to the communities and deities of Nanka (see **Table 2** below). Apart from rivers, Ududonka has sacred groves, and sacred landscapes that surrounds it.

Table 2. Profiles of Deities in Ududonka Pantheon and Their Functions.

S/N	Deity Name	Associated River	Function/Role	Unique Belief/Tourism Relevance
1	Ngene	Ngene River	Intermediary and protector during conflict	Sacred; festivals and rites of passage
2	Ezumezu	Ezumezu River (Ishi Mmiri)	Deity of truth and justice	Dispute resolution; legal anthropology interest
3	Ogba Uta	Not specified	Tribunal for falsely accused	Ethnographic tourism appeal
4	Akpochi	Not specified	Spiritual healer and protector	Medical heritage tourism potential
5	Ojukwu	Not specified	Reverses curses, maintains metaphysical balance	Pilgrimage site appeal
6	Ngwu	Not specified	Defensive deity	Faith-based healing appeal
7	Akpu	Not specified	Protective deity	Similar to Ngwu; mystical tourism draw
8	Agwu	Agwu Mmiri/ Aka Odele	Divination(Igba Afa), indigenous medicine	Ethnomedical tourism site
9	Agwu Aja	Agwu Mmiri/ Aka Odele	Healing and divination	Traditional medicine education appeal
10	Ogwugwu	Isi Odele/ Ogwugwu Mmiri	Fertility, women's protection, eco-spiritualism	Protects daughters; eco-cultural site
11	Eze Ihu Ohuru	Mmiri Eze Ihu Ohuru	Bringer of good luck	Family prosperity rituals
12	Ogbara Nnukwu	Nnukwu Odele	Grants abundance based on sincerity	Spirit of generosity; ethical appeal
13	Omma	Mmiri Omma/Mmiri Ocha	Cleansing and purification	Used after land abomination; spiritual bathing tourism
14	Arobuluagu	Not specified	Warrior and communal protector	Courage and cultural reenactments

Source: Fieldwork, 2024.

In **Table 2**, a detailed assessment was made of 14 deities associated with rivers, healing, justice, fertility, and spiritual purification. Each deity is linked with specific roles and rituals, reflecting a cosmological framework central to Nanka's identity. For example, Ngene deity and the Ngene River safeguard the community, while Ezumezu serves judicial roles. Ogwugwu embodies environmental protection and feminine spirituality, providing grounds for eco-spiritual and gender-based tourism. The **Table 2** provided outlines their names, rivers, functions, and unique cultural beliefs.

Figure 4 showed pictures of some of the deities in Ududonka Shrine. The deities and the rivers hold significant spiritual importance and are believed to enhance the power and influence of the associated deities. Based on the inter-

view with the respondents (per. Comm., 13th September, 2024), several sacred practices were highlighted. First, ritual initiation before river access involves specific prayers, libations, or invocations under guidance of a custodian or priest. Secondly, sacrifices, including animals, food, or symbolic materials, are offered to appease or communicate with deities before major festivals or decisions. Thirdly, fishing in sacred waters is strictly prohibited due to their association with sacred spirits and deities. Visitors to rivers undergo ritual cleansing, including prayers, symbolic washing, and sacred substances, to prepare spiritually and establish boundaries, distinguishing sacred from profane.



Figure 4. Pictures of some of the deities in Ududonka Shrine.

The Nanka people believe in reincarnation (*ịlọ uwa*) as a cultural mechanism for spiritual succession, with the current chief priest believed to be the reincarnation of his late father. This belief justifies his acceptance and spiritual authority within the community. This underscores how leadership in sacred offices is not chosen politically or arbitrarily, but through spiritual discernment, lineage recognition, and community validation. Mr Ebuka Nwankwo (per. Comm., 13th September, 2024) said that "the Chief Priest had life before deity's call". The Chief Priest was a luxury bus driver in Abuja, living a secular and modern lifestyle. Upon being "called" by Ududonka, he gave up his career and city life to return and serve the shrine. The Chief Priest of Ududonka Nanka, a figure in African traditional religion, was affirmed by the people of Nanka due to his non-negotiable duty to serve divine destiny. The worldview validates priesthood

as a spiritual lineage, based on ancestral continuity, collective memory, and spiritual intuition, rather than a voluntary role. Nanka sacred shrines' leadership is rooted in ancestral destiny and reincarnation, symbolizing the continuity between the living, dead, and unborn (Mr Ebuka Nwankwo per. Comm., 13th September, 2024).

Attama River

The Attama River, located in Enugwu Nanka, is a significant heritage resource in the Nanka community and is a sacred site with deep cultural and spiritual significance, serving as a source of fresh, clean water from large rock formations (see **Figure 5 and 6**). In an interview with an informant, Mr. Sunday Ofomata (conducted at Enugwu Nanka on 14th September, 2024), it was revealed that the Attama River holds a deep ancestral connection to the Ofomata family in Enugwu Nanka. The river is believed to have originated from the Ezenwenwe lineage within the Ofomata family, as per the informant.

The river serves as a natural heritage site and a symbol of ancestral pride and spiritual identity for the Ofomata family and Enugwu Nanka community. According to tradition, anyone wishing to visit or access the river must first seek permission from the Ofomata family, recognizing their role as the progenitors of this sacred water body. Within the Ofomata family compound resides a revered deity known as *Agwu Mmiri*, who is intimately associated with the Attama River and serves as its spiritual guardian. The community believes the river has protective powers over the descendants of the Ofomata lineage, preventing drowning, reinforcing the sacred bond between the river and their ancestry. Attama River is a vital natural resource for Nanka, providing fresh water and fertile lands for vegetable cultivation, contributing to the community's agricultural sustenance. The river's abundant fish supply provides protein and food security, but its use must comply with community spiritual beliefs and traditional practices. The Ofomata family is the progenitor of the Attama River, but its management and control are held by specific individuals. The late Atukagwu, who stayed in the river for extended periods, is responsible for controlling it. Angelina Afoudo and Ifeanyi Atakagwu, the son and successor, also have the privilege of visiting the river for sacrifices (Mr. Ezeugo Nwankwo at Enugwu Nanka on 14th September, 2024). Another key insight into the spiritual dynamics of the Attama River was provided by Mr. Sunday Ofomata, a 68-year-old elder and respected member of the Ofomata family (interviewed at Enugwu Nanka on 14th September, 2024). The speaker discussed the river's ritual calendar and timing, highlighting Eke market days as the most spiritually potent time for sacrificial offerings, prayers, and deity communication. This understanding of the ritual timing and personification of spirits reveals the layered nature of indigenous religious knowledge, in which time, place, and spiritual presence are deeply interwoven. It also underscores the importance of respecting traditional protocols and cosmological beliefs when engaging with sacred spaces in the community.

To conduct a sacrifice at the Attama River, specific ritual requirements must be strictly followed. These items include a white fowl, kola nuts (Oji Igbo), and physical currency usually in the form of ₦200 notes, ₦10 notes, or ₦1 coins depending on the nature and intention of the offering. Importantly, the monetary offering must be in cash, as the spiritual protocols of the ritual do not accept digital or electronic transfers. During the sacrificial rite, the fowl, money, and kola nuts are solemnly cast into the river while the officiant performs incantations and prayers. The offerings serve as a channel of communication, seeking favor, healing, protection, or reconciliation. The river is believed to bring peace, harmony, and spiritual balance to both the people of Nanka and neighboring communities. There are no recorded cases of drowning, a fact attributed to the protective presence of the river deity and its spiritual caretakers. This further reinforces the river's status as a benevolent force within the community a source of both physical sustenance and spiritual well-being.

Nwankwo Okoli River

Nwankwo Okoli River is another significant tangible heritage resource in Nanka community (see **Figure 7**). This river is located in Umu-Ochu, beyond Ndi-Ike, and is deeply embedded in the spiritual and cultural fabric of the community. As stated by an informant, Mr. Ezeugo Nwankwo (interviewed at Enugwu Nanka on 14th September, 2024), the Nwankwo Okoli River, much like the Attama River, is traced genealogically and spiritually to the Ofomata family, which plays a central role in many of Nanka's sacred narratives. Nwankwo Okoli River is revered as both a sacred site and a symbol of ancestral power, tied closely to the mythologies and oral histories passed down through generations in the Ofomata lineage.



Figure 5. Attama River.



Figure 6. Rock Spring of Attama River.



Figure 7. Nwankwo Okoli River.

4.2. Intangible Heritage Resources

In addition to the tangible heritage resources such as deities, shrines, and rivers, the intangible heritage of Nanka plays an equally vital role in preserving the community's identity and cultural continuity. During fieldwork, informants consistently emphasized practices such as festivals, traditional burial rites, and marriage ceremonies as significant components of their living heritage. These intangible expressions serve not only as markers of identity but also as mechanisms for social cohesion, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and spiritual renewal.

4.2.1. Festivals in Nanka

Festivals in Nanka are vital expressions of the community's intangible cultural heritage, reflecting its values, belief systems, and communal life. These annual and seasonal festivals are intricately linked to agricultural cycles, religious observances, and socio-cultural identity. The festivals also serve as channels for socialization, education, intergenerational knowledge transmission, and spiritual renewal. According to Mr. Mgbaka Ogu, a community elder from Ifite (interviewed on 13th September, 2024), festivals are central to Nanka's communal life.

> *He stated: "For me, festivals are a way for the people of Nanka and neighboring towns to come together and celebrate. We celebrate both good and challenging times. The festivals that mark the good times are often those dedicated to the deities of the land.*

From his perspective, festivals transcend mere celebration; they are deeply symbolic acts that reaffirm communal ties, express gratitude to the deities, and synchronize the social and spiritual calendars of the people. These events often feature music, dance, masquerade performances, rituals, and communal feasting, reflecting a rich tapestry of symbolic meanings. Furthermore, festivals tied to agricultural cycles or deity veneration such as those honoring Ududonka or Ogwugwu reinforce the sacred relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual world. The following are some of the prominent festivals celebrated in the Nanka community:

(1) Igba Ncha Festival: The Igba Ncha Festival is a unique, shrine-based ritual practice celebrated primarily by women. During this festival, women prepare

ncha (a special edible clay or chalk mixture) and bring it to the Ududonka shrine. The *ncha* is then used in the preparation of Abacha (African salad), which is served to shrine adherents and participants. The festival reflects the spiritual role of women in the religious life of the community and emphasizes communal sharing and purity. It also symbolizes the cleansing of the community and thanksgiving to the deities for peace and abundance.

(2) **Igba Ogwu Festival:** The Igba Ogwu Festival holds a historical significance in Nanka. Traditionally, it was a martial festival focused on preparing the younger generation, especially young men, for self-defense and communal protection. Through ritual performances, drills, and storytelling, elders taught strategies to guard against external threats. Though its militaristic essence has diminished in modern times, the festival continues to serve as a rite of passage, fostering discipline, unity, and readiness among the youth.

(3) **Igochi Festival:** The Igochi Festival is a three-day celebration dedicated to traditional spirituality and masquerade performance. The festival was historically widespread across all villages in Nanka, but today it is predominantly observed in Agbiligba community. The appearance of various masquerades (Mmanwu) during Igochi is deeply symbolic, representing the ancestral spirits and embodying moral values, ancestral authority, and entertainment. The masquerades perform dances and rituals that connect the physical and spiritual realms, reinforcing ancestral veneration and communal identity.

(4) **Igo Afo Festival (New Yam Festival):** Also known as the New Yam Festival, Igo Afo is one of the most important agricultural festivals in Nanka. It marks the end of the farming season and the beginning of a new harvest, celebrating the yam, which is considered the king of crops in Igbo culture. This festival is an occasion for thanksgiving to the deities and ancestors for a bountiful harvest. During Igo Afo, new yams are offered in shrines and later distributed and consumed in communal feasts, accompanied by music, dance, and masquerade displays.

(5) **Ududonka Deity Festival:** The Ududonka Deity Festival is a major spiritual celebration in honor of Ududonka and the numerous deities under its pantheon. Each deity associated with Ududonka has a designated celebration day, but the general festival is held annually primarily in March, during the Easter period. The festival involves ritual sacrifices, music, dance, communal feasting, and acts of worship. It provides an opportunity for the Nanka people to renew their covenant with the deities, seek spiritual blessings, and unite with extended family members and visitors from neighboring towns.

These festivals are not only celebratory but also function as living institutions for preserving the worldview, values, and identity of the Nanka people. They are important cultural assets that can be harnessed for sustainable heritage tourism, community education, and cultural diplomacy if properly documented and preserved.

4.2.2. Burial Rites in Nanka Community

Burial rites in Nanka constitute a significant aspect of the community's intangible cultural heritage, deeply embedded in spiritual belief systems and social customs. These practices are guided by gender norms, ancestral veneration, and ritual obligations, reflecting the values and cosmology of the people. As observed during fieldwork and stated by Mr. Stephen Nwankwo (Agbiligba, 14th September 2024), these rites vary depending on the gender and social status of the deceased. A central feature of burial in Nanka is the performance of *Igba Ogwu*, a traditional spirit dance. Igba Ogwu is performed by designated spiritual dancers or community members familiar with the rite. The dance includes chants, drum rhythms, and symbolic movements that communicate with the spiritual world. The performance of *Igba Ogwu* also strengthens the communal belief in reincarnation and the cyclical nature of life and death, a concept widely accepted in Nanka. Burial and funerals bring people together, strengthening kinship bonds and shared identity. Burial rites in Nanka serve multiple roles. They provide a pathway for the dead to transition into the ancestral world. Through taboos and protocols, the rites reinforce gender roles and respect for tradition. Burial practices serve as moments of cultural education for the younger generation. Burial rites in Nanka are complex, symbolic, and crucial for cultural identity preservation. Documenting and preserving these rites help safeguard heritage and understand the philosophical framework of the Nanka people.

4.2.3. Marriage Ceremonies in Nanka Community

Marriage ceremonies in Nanka represent a vital component of the community's intangible cultural heritage. More than a personal or romantic commitment, marriage in Nanka is a social institution, interwoven with cultural values, communal expectations, and ancestral traditions. It serves not only to formalize the union of two individuals but also to unite families, establish social alliances, and perpetuate the customs of the community (Mrs Chinwe Nwankwo, pers. Comm., 14th September, 2024). As reported by community informants (Mr. Akalaka Mgba at Enugwu Nanka on 14th September, 2024), marriage is considered one of the most revered cultural practices in Nanka. The ceremony embodies cultural pride, moral expectations, and ancestral blessings. A distinctive feature of marriage tradition in Nanka is the requirement for the groom to own a house before proceeding with marriage. This expectation underscores the community's emphasis on responsibility, stability, and preparedness. As one informant put it, "You must show where you will keep your wife." The prospective husband is expected to demonstrate that he can provide a secure and decent home for his future wife, symbolizing his readiness to become a family man (Mr. Akalaka Mgba at Enugwu Nanka on 14th September, 2024).

Traditional Practices and Rituals in Marriage Ceremony in Nanka

Though modern influences have led to changes, the stages of traditional marriage in Nanka generally follow a culturally structured process:

(1) Inquiry and Introduction (Iju Ase): The groom's family makes initial contact with the bride's family to express interest.

(2) Consent and Investigation: Both families investigate each other's lineage to ensure compatibility and avoid taboo unions (such as marrying from families with perceived spiritual or moral issues).

(3) Payment of Bride Price (Ime Ego): This includes the presentation of gifts, drinks, and symbolic items. While the bride price is symbolic and not commercial, it remains a vital rite.

(4) Traditional Marriage Ceremony (Igba Nwunye): This includes public celebrations, music, dance, and communal feasting. It often features the bride searching for her groom among guests and presenting him with palm wine. Once she locates him, she offers him the wine to drink, publicly affirming her choice. Following this act, the bride leads her groom to where her father and kindred are seated, signaling their return as a united couple. The elders then offer blessings and formal approval, finalizing the traditional rites and legitimizing the union in the eyes of the community. The in-law is expected to bring one goat, twenty kola nuts, big gallon of palm wine and seven tubers of yam. These offerings serve both ceremonial and symbolic purposes. The goat represents life and fertility, the kola nuts are symbols of respect and hospitality in Igbo culture, while the yam signifies sustenance and economic stability. The presentation of these items is a public demonstration of the groom's capability to provide for his future wife and participate fully in the social responsibilities of marriage (Interview with Mrs. Ngozi Ezeh, September 14, 2024).

(5) Final Blessing and Departure: Elders and family members bless the union, and the bride formally joins her husband. This ritual, according to an informant (Mr. Akalaka Mgba at Enugwu Nanka on 14th September, 2024), continues to hold great symbolic and cultural value, and remains a cornerstone of traditional marriage customs in Nanka.

4.2.4. Ozo Title Taking in Nanka

In Nanka, the Ozo title represents one of the most prestigious and revered cultural institutions. It is a significant intangible heritage practice that confers honor, authority, and social distinction upon individuals who have demonstrated exceptional leadership qualities, wisdom, integrity, and philanthropy within the community. The title is not only a symbol of personal achievement but also a marker of one's commitment to upholding the cultural, spiritual, and ethical standards of Nanka society. Ozo title holds the highest prestige and is deeply embedded in Igbo cosmology and indigenous governance structures. Attaining this title is considered a major milestone and is often associated with elderhood and spiritual maturity.

Dynamics of Title-Taking in Nanka Community: According to an informant (Mr. Stephen Nwankwo at Ag-

biligba on 14th September, 2024), title-taking in Nanka has evolved over time and now varies depending on the prevailing circumstances within the community. The Ọzọ title is not conferred lightly. One of the core requirements is that the candidate must be a true indigene of Nanka, known in Igbo as "Nwafo àlà", a native son of the land (Mr Samuel Odumgbe on the 16th of September, 2024). This criterion emphasizes the importance of lineage, ancestral connection, and a deep-rooted understanding of Nanka's customs and values. It ensures that only those with legitimate ties to the land and its people are entrusted with such a sacred responsibility.

Initiation Process for Ọzọ Title in Nanka: The Ọzọ title in Nanka is a highly structured and culturally significant process, starting with a formal declaration of intent by the aspiring candidate. To initiate into the Ọzọ institution, candidates must visit Onyeisi Nze (the head of the Nze title holders), sign a symbolic gesture with a hot drink and kola nut (oji). The candidate is assessed by the community's executive council, based on factors like moral integrity, communal contributions, leadership record, and social standing within Nanka. The candidate must be an upstanding and generous contributor to community development, and must personally visit all existing Ọzọ title holders within the community. The stage of title-taking involves a final scrutiny by elders and titleholders, reinforcing communal values and examining a candidate's background, intentions, and worthiness. Family selection for Ọzọ titles in Nanka has been prioritized, promoting equity and democratization while maintaining traditional values, ensuring representation across all lineages.

Physical and Financial Requirements of the Ọzọ Title: The Ọzọ title conferment in Nanka is a spiritual and cultural rite, requiring a detailed list of materials and financial contributions. These include: One large cow, two goats, 100 live chickens, 100 tubers of yam, 100 kola nuts, 50 bitter kola, 10 gallons of palm wine, two cartons of small stout (for the kings, known as *Ndị Nze*). Five cartons of malt for the *Umuada* (daughters of the lineage) and ₦700,000 in cash. The candidate must prepare traditional meals like pounded yam and white rice with stew for festivities, and share live chickens among Ndị Nze. Insufficient chickens require payment. The initiation ceremony in Nanka involves a grand cultural celebration, featuring masquerade displays, traditional dances, music, and communal feasting, marking the official induction and honoring of the new titleholder. The Ọzọ title is a symbol of outstanding service, leadership, and cultural preservation, recognizing a candidate's enduring legacy and role in upholding Nanka community values.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that Nanka community in Orumba North LGA of Anambra State is richly endowed with cultural heritage resources that are both tangible and intangible. These resources, rooted in the community's indigenous knowledge systems and spirituality, provide significant opportunities for sustainable tourism development. The ethnographic exploration of Nanka's heritage resources reveals a culturally rich and environmentally embedded landscape, where spirituality, ecology, and identity converge to shape communal life. Through detailed thematic analysis, five interrelated themes emerged: (1) Tangible and Intangible Heritage Resources in Nanka; (2) cultural and spiritual significance of heritage resources; (3) indigenous ecological knowledge; (4) community perspectives on tourism; and (5) opportunities for sustainable development. These findings provide a foundational understanding for framing cultural heritage tourism in ways that are locally rooted, inclusive, and ecologically sensitive.

5.1. Tangible and Intangible Heritage Resources in Nanka

The ethnographic findings revealed a wide array of tangible and intangible heritage assets in Nanka. The tangible resources are sacred rivers (e.g., Ngene, Ezumezu), and deity shrines (e.g., Ogwugwu, Arobuluagu), while intangible heritage are festivals, burial ceremony, marriage custom and traditional title taking. These heritage resources are deeply interwoven into the community's daily life, forming a rich spiritual and cultural landscape that is largely undocumented and underutilized for tourism development.

5.2. Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Heritage Resources

Nanka's heritage is spiritually and functionally rooted, with deities representing justice, fertility, healing, and protection, reinforcing the community's moral code and spiritual worldview. Nanka's heritage landscape features sacred rivers associated with deities, serving as spiritual and ecological assets, preserving biodiversity despite taboos, and physical features. This aligns with findings by Okonkwo [51], who argued that spiritual associations with natural elements in Igbo culture often led to conservation practices that parallel modern sustainability approaches. The deities serve not merely as objects of worship but as spiritual institutions with deep historical functions. The community's worldview is shaped by the close association of deities with specific rivers, groves, and sacred landscapes. Ngene, a guardian deity, symbolizes communal protection and spiritual order, while Ezumezu's role in conflict resolution and social justice supports indigenous legal traditions and community harmony. Active belief systems reveal a metaphysical relationship between humans, nature, and the divine, resembling sacred tourism destinations in Nigeria. Cultural heritage sites in Nigeria have historically attracted diverse spiritual beliefs, practices, political and socio-economic activities, creating cultural remains and settlements known as heritage. Nanka practices deity worship through rituals, offerings, festivals, and communal prayers, promoting moral codes, social order, and environmental stewardship within the community's worldview. Nanka's deities, spread across neighboring towns like Oko, Igboukwu, and Agulu, promote spiritual unity and cultural identity, enhancing appreciation of the area's intangible heritage. Nanka's heritage resources, known for their living spiritualism, set them apart from other global sites, providing a unique advantage for cultural tourism development.

Interviews and field observations revealed a significant theme: the ritual initiation required before accessing sacred rivers like Mmiri Ngene, Ezumezu, and Attama River. Initiation rites are spiritual cleansing and symbolic purification ceremonies, typically led by the community's chief priest or other designated custodians. Respondents believe these rituals not only safeguard individuals from spiritual harm but also uphold the sanctity of rivers, which are considered dwelling places of powerful deities. Nanka's spiritual heritage is centered around sacrificial offerings made to deities before major festivals, healing rituals, conflict resolutions, or seasonal transitions. White fowls, kola nuts, palm wine, and symbolic monetary tokens are offered during incantations or ceremonial performances as sacrifices. These acts are believed to ensure blessings, justice, fertility, and communal harmony.

The cultural practice of prohibiting fishing in rivers is rooted in a belief system that sees these waters as dwelling places of spiritual entities like Ngene, Ezumezu, Agwu Mmiri, and Ogwugwu. The fishes in these rivers are considered sacred messengers or deity incarnations, making their capture or consumption a significant spiritual transgression. Like other societies' sacred natural areas, indigenous ecological governance uses cultural taboos to protect biodiversity and ecological equilibrium. Nanka's intangible heritage is reflected in cultural expressions like Igba Ncha Festival, Igba Afo Igochi, and Igba Ogwu, which embody communal values and identity (Interview with Mr. Mgbaka Ogu, September 13, 2024). These festivals provide ideal platforms for cultural tourism, offering immersive experiences in music, dance, and masquerade traditions. Achebe [52] emphasized that such festivals in Igbo society are central to the maintenance of community bonds and the reinforcement of shared cosmologies. Burial and marriage rites are also profound expressions of heritage in Nanka. Practices like *Igba Ogwu*, a spirit dance guiding souls to the ancestral realm highlight a belief system that could intrigue cultural anthropologists and spiritual tourists alike (Interview with Mr. Stephen Nwankwo, September 14, 2024). The symbolic offering of palm wine in traditional marriages and the rituals involved in Ozo title-taking present unique ceremonial attractions (Interview with Mr. Akalaka Mgba, September 14, 2024). Onwuejeogwu [53] emphasized on this notion in his book. . The involvement of groups such as the Ndị Nze, Umuada, and age grades shows an organized system of cultural recognition that can be harnessed for community-based tourism events and heritage festivals.

The study also found that custodianship of heritage resources in Nanka is strongly embedded in family lineages. For example, the Ofomata family holds spiritual and cultural authority over the Attama River, believed to have originated from their lineage. Rituals involving this river are performed only with their consent and supervision (Inter-

view with Mr. Sunday Ofomata, September 14, 2024). Similarly, the distinction between progenitors and caregivers of sacred sites such as in the case of Atukagwu, illustrates indigenous systems of environmental governance [54, 55]. Such community-based governance models are not only crucial for cultural preservation but also offer frameworks for inclusive tourism development, where benefits are equitably shared, and local voices are central to planning [3]. The belief in reincarnation, as evidenced in the appointment of the current chief priest of Ududonka (believed to be the reincarnation of his father), adds a mystical layer to Nanka's spiritual worldview. This belief, deeply rooted in Igbo cosmology, enhances the uniqueness of the community's religious tourism potential (Interview with Mr. Emeka Mgbe, September 13, 2024). Such beliefs can serve as powerful narratives in spiritual tourism, which is increasingly attracting travelers seeking meaningful and transformative experiences [56].

These spiritual functions represent living heritage, as they continue to influence rituals, taboos, and ceremonies today. Such sites and practices offer tremendous potential for cultural heritage tourism, particularly for visitors and scholars interested in African cosmologies, indigenous legal systems, and religious anthropology. As Vukonic (2002) noted, sacred landscapes and spiritual belief systems can serve as unique cultural tourism assets when developed ethically and with community involvement.

The sustainable development of tourism in Nanka, a community deeply rooted in ancestral spirituality and traditional governance, requires a culturally sensitive framework that transforms intangible heritage into meaningful visitor experiences. **Table 3** illustrates how key heritage elements in Nanka such as beliefs in reincarnation, the life of the chief priest, spiritual calling rituals, and sacred lineage can be adapted into tourism applications while respecting community values and sacred protocols.

Table 3. Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism Applications in Nanka.

Heritage Element	Tourism Application	Safeguard Mechanism
Belief in reincarnation	Storytelling sessions with the priest or community elders	Obtain community consent and present stories respectfully
Life of the Chief Priest	Documentary-style exhibits showing his transformation	Avoid sensationalism; emphasize spirituality
Spiritual calling rituals	Educational workshops on indigenous spirituality	No ritual reenactments without cultural approval
Sacred lineage	Highlight family trees and their spiritual roles in shrine museums	Ensure narratives are community-approved and dignified

The belief in *ilo uwa* (reincarnation) is widespread among the people of Nanka. This spiritual concept is woven into naming customs, ancestral veneration, and moral narratives. Integrating this belief into tourism through storytelling sessions led by priests or respected elders allows visitors to appreciate indigenous cosmology and philosophy. However, to maintain the integrity of these beliefs, community consent and respectful presentation are essential. This approach not only educates tourists but empowers local custodians as interpreters of their own heritage.

The life of the *Onye Isi Arusi* (chief priest) is a sacred narrative marked by spiritual transformation and cultural responsibility. His role in mediating between the deities and the community, especially in relation to the Ududonka deity, is a powerful heritage resource. A tourism application such as documentary-style exhibits including oral interviews, visuals of ceremonial attire, and historical contexts can be installed in local heritage centers or shrines. To prevent cultural exploitation, the exhibits must avoid sensationalism and instead focus on the spiritual and societal significance of the priesthood.

In Nanka, spiritual calling rituals, including initiations and ancestral consultations, are central to the community's religious practices. While these rituals are sacred and often restricted to insiders, they hold immense cultural value for interpretation. Educational workshops can be organized to explain their symbolism, process, and role in societal order. However, it is imperative that no reenactments occur without full cultural approval, and even then, the sacredness of these practices must guide how they are presented. This ensures that tourism does not become a voyeuristic experience but remains a respectful learning opportunity.

Sacred family lineages in Nanka especially those entrusted with shrine maintenance and spiritual leadership represent a living heritage. These lineages possess oral histories, ritual knowledge, and community memory. Tourism development can include museum-style presentations of family trees, ancestral artifacts, and narrated histories that explain their spiritual functions in society. This should be done in a way that is dignified and community-approved, ensuring that the narratives reflect the voice of the people and not external interpretations. Such presentations also enhance community pride and promote intergenerational learning.

5.3. Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Environmental Practices

Nanka's heritage is spiritually and functionally rooted, with deities representing justice, fertility, healing, and protection, reinforcing the community's moral code and spiritual worldview. For instance, Ezumezu Deity, revered for adjudication, still attracts people from neighboring towns for dispute resolution. Spiritual legacy significantly influences African communities' identity and governance, indicating the potential of legal and anthropological tourism models in enhancing community development. Nanka ritual systems contain an indigenous ecological knowledge that governs land use, biodiversity conservation, and spiritual stewardship. Indigenous customary laws in Ogwugwu and Agwu protect sacred groves from erosion and ecological degradation by prohibiting farming, hunting, and tree felling. Nanka's cultural responsibility to preserve sacred groves leads to preserved ecosystems, presenting high-value ecotourism attractions like Ogwugwu's grove, offering birdwatching, botanical tours, and spiritual retreats. In a typical traditional African society, the traditional value system is inseparable from the people's biodiversity features [57].

Participants spoke of taboos against polluting rivers like Ezumezu Mmiri, which, apart from their spiritual status, serve as clean water sources. Fishing in Nanka's sacred waters is strictly prohibited due to traditional environmental ethics, protection of aquatic life, biodiversity, and water purity. It is important to highlight that in several communities in Nigeria, indigenous taboos with corresponding punishments have successfully governed the exploitation of the environment. Culture shapes people's cognitive interpretation of the universe. The reason for this is because people's compliance with environmental intervention projects is mostly dependent on social ideals. These practices align with the core principles of ecotourism, where ecological integrity and cultural values are preserved in tandem. The prohibition of fishing provides a compelling example of sacred ecology where nature and the supernatural are intricately linked. It symbolizes a sophisticated spiritual ecology that has both environmental and touristic value. This sacred framework ensures that heritage tourism in Nanka can evolve in a way that is ecologically sustainable, culturally respectful, and community-empowering, aligning with the global principles of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. These restrictions on access, hunting, and deforestation in sacred groves of Ududonka Shrine in Nanka have sustained biodiversity over generations. The community's cosmology thus supports natural conservation practices without the need for formal enforcement mechanisms (Adekunle et al., 2020). The study thus validates the assertion that indigenous conservation ethics must inform tourism planning in culturally and biologically diverse regions.

5.4. Community Perspectives and Willingness to Support Tourism Development

Local communities are the most valuable assets for a tourist destination; therefore, their perceptions of tourism constitute a crucial pillar for designing tourism development strategies that promote sustainable development. The success of tourism development in a rural setting depends on securing the support and active participation of stakeholders, in particular the community. It is important for planners to gather the perception of local communities about the impacts of tourism when planning the development of tourism [58]. Tourism development in rural areas can significantly contribute to rural communities' prosperity if strategically managed. Success depends on stakeholder support and active participation, particularly the community. Perception is crucial for building knowledge about products and the world, and each person's perception is the whole truth [58]. Traditional custodians, elders, youths, and women's groups are interested in tourism development that preserves sacred traditions, if respect and benefits are guaranteed. Involving local people in the process and optimizing their social and economic advantages is essential for managing tourist development, making them equally

significant players alongside the public and commercial sectors. Nanka host communities value their heritage resources highly, but developing them for tourist visits without their involvement and interpretations may not be sustainable [57]. Skepticism exists regarding commercialization and potential desecration of sacred spaces, emphasizing the need for inclusive, culturally sensitive tourism planning. The Nanka community is increasingly acknowledging tourism as a potential development pathway, despite differing opinions on its potential for heritage preservation, job creation, and cultural education promotion. Participants emphasized the need for respectful engagement, warning against the exploitation or distortion of sacred traditions. The demand for tourism in rural areas can contribute to the development of sustainable tourism that could develop rural communities. The strategic development of tourism by Local Destination Management Organization (LDMO) and other related stakeholders can contribute to sustainable tourism development that provides boundless economic opportunities to rural communities [58].

Local communities play a crucial role in tourism development, ensuring sustainability and good reception towards tourists through their involvement, role, and management [59]. In line with best practices in community-based tourism and rights-based heritage management, the study indicates that the community prefers participatory tourism planning that involves youth councils, traditional leaders, and cultural custodians. Since the community gains directly from these tourist-related activities, community-based tourism needs to be run and controlled by the community [59]. For example, community-run festivals, guided shrine tours, and traditional medicine expos can offer tourism products designed by the community, rather than imposed by external agencies. The successful heritage tourism in Nanka should be based on participatory frameworks that maintain cultural autonomy while promoting responsible visitor engagement.

5.5. Opportunities of Heritage Resources for Sustainable Cultural Heritage Tourism Development

Based on the findings, several strategic opportunities exist for positioning Nanka as a model for eco-cultural and spiritual tourism. The heritage resources of Nanka, both tangible and intangible, present substantial opportunities for tourism development. They are deeply rooted in the community's history, culture, and spiritual life, offering a compelling foundation for sustainable cultural heritage tourism. Nanka's rich cultural heritage including Ududonka shrine, associated deities and rivers, traditional festivals, burial, marriage rites, and title-taking ceremonies attracts both domestic and international tourists interested in indigenous African traditions. The proper harnessing of heritage resources for sustainable cultural heritage tourism that will benefit the community economically, socially, and environmentally. Cultural enthusiasts, researchers, and spiritual tourists could be drawn to the community to witness and participate in the Ududonka deity festivals and Igba Ogwu ceremonies, unique marriage and burial practices rooted in ancestral traditions and observance of river-related rituals and sacrifices tied to sacred water bodies like Attama River and Nwankwo Okoli River. Attama River, emerging from rocks in Enugwu Nanka, offers a serene natural setting where tourists can enjoy the natural spring water and take part in eco-friendly river tours. The presence of spiritual healers like Akpochi and Agwu priests offers a platform for health tourism that integrates indigenous and holistic medicine. Tourists, researchers, and spiritual seekers may find these culturally protected rivers appealing for eco-spiritual tourism, particularly as they are surrounded by rich oral traditions, ritual performances, and symbolic landscapes. The no-fishing taboo aligns with sustainable tourism and sacred ecology, appealing to conservation-minded tourists and researchers. Interpretive signage, guided river visits, and spiritual storytelling can elevate awareness while respecting local prohibitions.

Tourism based on heritage resources has the potential to generate income and improve livelihoods in Nanka. With appropriate infrastructure and community involvement. Tourism is a catalyst for economic growth, cultural preservation and social integrity [60]. Cultural tourism creates avenues for economic activities that can benefit artisans, farmers, storytellers, performers, and hospitality service providers. Festivals like Igba Ncha, Igbochi, and Igo Afo (New Yam) offer opportunities for masquerade displays and dance performances by local youth groups. There should be sales of traditional cuisine like *abacha*, palm wine, and yam dishes. Local sales of traditional items such as kola nuts, yam, palm wine, traditional costumes, and artifacts are sold along the festival arena. Seasonal festivals involving masquerades, initiation rites, and harvest celebrations could attract diasporic

and international visitors, enhancing revenue and cultural continuity. During the Festivals, the influx of visitors boosts lodging demand for guesthouses and home stays.

Tourism can act as a catalyst for the preservation of endangered traditions, especially among younger generations. Documenting and showcasing rituals, oral histories, festivals, and customary laws through tourism activities can help to encourage intergenerational transfer of knowledge and promote pride in local heritage and community cohesion. Tourism brings about cultural preservation and transmission of the heritage resources. Tourism can help preserve Nanka's intangible heritage by making it valuable and relevant to both locals and visitors. For example, Ọzọ Title-Taking Ceremony represents honor, leadership, and cultural identity. The elaborate ceremonies involving presentation of livestock and kola nuts, cultural dances by Umuada, age grades, and masquerades and performances of spirit dances like *Igba Ogwu* can be documented and shared through community museums, festival exhibitions and educational tourism programs. This not only preserves the knowledge but also instills pride in younger generations. Marriage and Burial Rites promote community unity and a shared sense of identity, which can be extended to include tourists through participatory tourism. Sacred rivers and groves in the study site can be promoted to eco-cultural tourism that respects spiritual taboos and fosters environmental awareness.

Nanka heritage resources can be an ethnographic learning hub by collaborations with universities and cultural organizations could facilitate field schools, internships, and research residencies in Nanka, promoting cultural education tourism. Developing mapped trails that link shrines, groves, and rivers with interpretive signage and oral histories could create immersive experiences for visitors while regulating access. Sacred groves and rivers can be repositioned as eco-retreats for meditation, spiritual cleansing, and nature-based learning. Drawing on both narrative and spatial data, the study identifies several opportunities for sustainable tourism development. These include establishing guided eco-cultural trails to sites like Ogba Uta and Ogwugwu groves, curating pilgrimage festivals, and promoting traditional herbal medicine education linked to Akpochi and Agwu shrines. The Ududonka seasonal deity rituals and Nanka festivals can be transformed into immersive, respectful tourism products. These activities can be embedded in seasonal festivals or diaspora return programs. The inclusion of sacred rivers and groves in tourism maps, developed with community input, offers a pathway for spatial planning and conservation management.

Furthermore, integrating indigenous festivals such as the *Ududonka Masquerade Festival* into the regional tourism calendar can attract diasporic Igbo communities and cultural enthusiasts. Calendar-based festivals that attract diasporic Igbo and cultural tourists should be integrated. Such initiatives not only enhance local livelihoods but also reinforce cultural identity and intergenerational knowledge transmission. Moreover, cultural mapping of sacred sites done with local input could guide infrastructure development, preserve ecological zones, and enhance spatial heritage planning.

Importantly, the study reinforces that Nanka's heritage resources should not be viewed merely as static artifacts but as dynamic cultural systems that evolve with social and environmental changes. Harnessing this heritage for tourism must be aligned with sustainability principles respecting spiritual values, protecting the environment, and ensuring community ownership and benefit-sharing. The emphasis should remain on community leadership, cultural authenticity, and environmental respect principles that ensure tourism serves as a means of cultural and ecological preservation rather than disruption.

6. Recommendations for Heritage Tourism Development in Nanka

Documentation and Preservation of Heritage Resources: Undertake systematic documentation of both tangible and intangible heritage resources (e.g., shrines, festivals, rivers, rituals, and oral histories). Establish a community-run heritage archive or cultural museum in collaboration with local schools and scholars to preserve knowledge for future generations.

Infrastructure Development: Improve access roads and signage to key heritage sites such as Ududonka Shrine, Attama River, and Nwankwo Okoli River. Provide basic amenities (e.g., toilets, sitting areas, waste disposal) around cultural and natural attractions to accommodate tourists comfortably. This is visible by using constituency development funds or World Bank community-driven development (CDD) projects to con-

struct low-impact roads and footbridges.

Community Participation and Capacity Building Programs: Train local youth and stakeholders as tour guides, cultural interpreters, and local crafts through workshops on heritage management and sustainable tourism with support from the Nigeria Tourism Development Corporation (NTDC). Encourage active participation of the Ofomata family, Ududonka shrine custodians, and traditional title holders in tourism planning.

Cultural Festival Promotion and Revitalization: Revive and promote major festivals such as Igba Ncha, Igba Ogwu, Igochi, and the Ududonka Deity Festival as annual tourism events. Collaborate with the Anambra State Ministry of Culture and Tourism to brand and market these festivals.

Eco-Spiritual and Educational Tourism Development: Develop eco-spiritual tourism packages around sacred rivers and forests (e.g., guided visits to Attama River and sacred groves with storytelling). Partner with universities and researchers to conduct cultural immersion programs, internships, and research tours in Nanka. Engage trained local youth as custodians and interpreters of shrines and rituals, combining education with tourism employment.

Cultural Sensitization and Respect for Indigenous Beliefs: Ensure that tourism activities respect sacred practices such as ritual prohibitions (e.g., no fishing in sacred rivers, no unauthorized entry into shrines). Educate visitors through signs, brochures, and orientation sessions on the spiritual significance of the heritage sites.

Policy and Institutional Support: Advocate for local and state government policies that support heritage tourism development in Nanka. Create a Nanka Heritage and Tourism Development Committee to coordinate efforts among stakeholders.

Digital Marketing and Storytelling: Create a digital presence for Nanka's heritage tourism (e.g., website, social media pages, YouTube documentaries). Promote stories of unique traditions such as reincarnation, title-taking, and sacrificial rites to global audiences.

Public-Private Partnerships: Attract investment through public-private partnerships for the development of eco-lodges, craft shops, and cultural centers. Partner with NGOs and cultural heritage foundations to support preservation and tourism initiatives.

7. Conclusions

This study makes a unique contribution by integrating ethnographic inquiry with a sustainable tourism development framework to document and analyse the underexplored heritage resources of Nanka, a community with rich but largely undocumented cultural and spiritual traditions. While previous research on Nigerian cultural heritage tourism has focused on more prominent sites and generalized models[61], this work brings micro-level, place-specific insights grounded in lived experiences, oral histories, and participatory observation. The study's emphasis on sacred ecology, including ritual initiation, sacrificial rites, and spiritual restrictions on resource use provides an original lens for understanding how intangible cultural practices can be integrated into community-based tourism planning without commodifying or eroding their spiritual value. Furthermore, by explicitly linking indigenous ecological governance to sustainable tourism policy recommendations, the research bridges the gap between heritage preservation and practical tourism development strategies in rural Nigerian contexts. This methodological and thematic focus positions the study as a pioneering reference for policy, heritage governance, and culturally respectful tourism models in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings demonstrate that Nanka's heritage resources are robust, dynamic, and deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge systems. Its deities, rivers, festivals, and rites represent a unique blend of spiritual, historical, and cultural wealth that, if harnessed thoughtfully, can position the community as a notable destination for cultural and spiritual tourism in Nigeria. With strategic planning, community involvement, and sustainable practices, Nanka can transform its ancestral traditions into powerful tools for economic development, cultural preservation, and international recognition.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, J.N.U.E. and E.C.M.; methodology, J.N.U.E.; software, J.N.U.E.; validation, J.N.U.E. and E.C.M.; formal analysis, J.N.U.E.; investigation, J.N.U.E.; resources, E.C.M.; data curation, J.N.U.E. and E.C.M.; writing—original draft preparation, J.N.U.E. and E.C.M.; writ-

ing—review and editing, J.N.U.E. and E.C.M.; supervision, J.N.U.E.; project administration, J.N.U.E. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

No funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Institutional Review Board Statement for the study was obtained from the Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, on August 29, 2024, with unique reference number: FAREC/2024108010. Furthermore, this study was prepared and conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Helsinki Declaration.

Informed Consent Statement

Oral consents of the participants were sought and obtained on September 10, 2024 during a meeting with community elders, custodians of deities, traditional leaders (Nze and Ozo title holders), women leaders (*Umuada*) and youth leaders in the study area before the collection of data commenced. The participants were assured of confidentiality and the protection of their privacy in the study. This was done by making the removing the private information of the participants.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of cultural heritage information and the ethical obligation to protect sacred knowledge, the raw data from this study, including detailed interview transcripts and field observations, are not publicly shared. Select de-identified excerpts directly relevant to the findings may be provided upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to approval by the custodians of Nanka's heritage resources and adherence to community ethical protocols.

Acknowledgment

The researcher would like to thank all the respondents who provided basic information for the study.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest among the authors.

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