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Digital Custodianship

An Ethnographic Study of Heritage Governance and Archival Praxis in Morocco, 2021–2026

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ABSTRACT

The digitisation of cultural heritage in North Africa presents complex challenges, intersecting with post-colonial governance, technological access, and evolving notions of custodianship. This study addresses a critical gap in understanding the lived, on-the-ground practices of heritage professionals navigating these tensions. This research investigates the socio-technical practices and institutional logics shaping digital heritage preservation. It aims to analyse how archival praxis is reconfigured by digital tools and to critically examine the power dynamics inherent in new governance models. A multi-sited ethnographic study was conducted, employing participant observation, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis of policy documents. Fieldwork was centred within three key institutional typologies: a national archive, a community-led digital repository, and a university-based research initiative. Analysis revealed a dominant theme of 'negotiated autonomy', where institutional actors strategically comply with state-led digitisation directives while cultivating informal, subaltern networks for preserving contested materials. A concrete finding is that approximately 70% of interviewed archivists described maintaining a 'shadow archive' of digitised items withheld from official platforms due to political sensitivity. Digital custodianship in this context is characterised by a dual praxis of public compliance and private stewardship, challenging monolithic conceptions of heritage governance and revealing the resilience of informal archival networks. Policymakers should support the development of ethical frameworks for digitisation that acknowledge and legitimise community-based archival labour. Funding bodies should prioritise infrastructure that enables secure, distributed storage and metadata sovereignty for sub-national heritage groups. digital heritage, archival ethnography, governance, praxis, custodianship, Morocco This paper provides a novel empirical analysis of the 'shadow archive' as a key mechanism for heritage preservation within semi-authoritarian digital contexts, contributing a grounded theory of 'negotiated

autonomy' to African digital studies.

Keywords: *Digital heritage, Archival praxis, Post-colonial governance, Maghreb, Ethnographic methodology, Digital repatriation, Cultural custodianship*

Article Highlights

- Ethnographic study reveals 'negotiated autonomy' in post-colonial digital heritage governance.
- Archivists strategically balance state directives with informal networks for contested materials.
- Digital preservation reconfigures archival praxis through socio-technical assemblages.
- Findings challenge monolithic conceptions of heritage governance in semi-authoritarian contexts.

Policy Implications

Support ethical frameworks that legitimize community-based archival labour and prioritise infrastructure for secure, distributed storage with metadata sovereignty.

This study provides a grounded theory of negotiated autonomy through empirical analysis of shadow archives.

Introduction

The digitisation of cultural heritage has emerged as a dominant paradigm in global preservation, promising universal access, democratised knowledge, and a bulwark against physical decay or political erasure. Yet, this techno-optimistic narrative often obscures the complex socio-political realities of its implementation, particularly in regions with distinct colonial histories and evolving postcolonial identities. This ethnographic study examines the situated practices, contested governance, and emergent archival praxis surrounding digital heritage in the Kingdom of Morocco between 2021 and 2024. Situated at the crossroads of Africa, Europe, and the Arab world, Morocco presents a critical and underexplored case study for understanding how digital custodianship is negotiated within a West African context, where global digital infrastructures intersect with deeply localised histories of collection, curation, and memory . The research posits that digitisation is never a neutral, technical process but a form of governance—a ‘digital custodianship’ that involves profound questions of authority, authenticity, and epistemic power over the cultural record.

In Morocco, the drive to digitise is propelled by a confluence of state-led cultural policy, international institutional partnerships, and grassroots initiatives from scholars, artists, and community activists. National institutions, such as the National Library and the National Archives, are engaged in ambitious projects to convert vast holdings of manuscripts, photographs, and audio-visual materials into digital formats. These endeavours are frequently framed within discourses of modernisation, national prestige, and safeguarding a heritage perceived as vulnerable. However, this official drive exists in tension with other forms of custodianship. As Stoler reminds us, archives are not inert repositories but ‘epistemic machines’ that produce certain kinds of knowledge while silencing others. In the Moroccan context, this raises urgent questions about which artefacts, languages, and narratives are prioritised for digitisation, and which remain in the analogue shadows. The digitisation of Amazigh (Berber) oral poetry collections, for instance, operates within a different political and cultural economy than the digitisation of Arabic administrative records from the colonial period, each implicating distinct communities and claims to representation.

The concept of ‘digital custodianship’ developed here extends beyond the technical management of digital assets to encompass the entire sociotechnical assemblage of people, policies, technologies, and values that determine how heritage is selected, formatted, and made accessible. It is a practice fraught

with what Appadurai terms the ‘politics of possibility’, where decisions about metadata standards, platform design, and access protocols fundamentally shape who can be a ‘user’ and what kind of ‘use’ is permissible. This governance operates at multiple, often conflicting, scales. International agencies and funders promote universal standards and open-access models, while local practitioners may advocate for contextual, restricted, or culturally specific modes of engagement that respect traditional knowledge systems. Meanwhile, the Moroccan state navigates its role as both the sovereign authority over national heritage and a participant in transnational digital ecosystems, seeking to control the narrative of its history while leveraging the soft power of its cultural capital.

This study is grounded in the field of African Studies, which has long critiqued the extraction and external curation of African material culture . The digital turn introduces new dimensions to these enduring concerns. While digitisation can facilitate the virtual repatriation of artefacts held in distant museums, it also risks creating new forms of digital alienation, where communities are disconnected from the physicality and ritual context of cultural objects, now rendered as decontextualised data points on a server . Furthermore, the materiality of digital preservation itself—the servers, energy requirements, and planned obsolescence of software—presents profound sustainability challenges, often overlooked in favour of the digital artefact’s perceived immortality. In Morocco, where infrastructural inequalities persist, the question of who bears the long-term cost and responsibility for maintaining the digital ‘back-up’ of culture is of paramount importance.

The primary objective of this ethnographic inquiry is therefore to illuminate the lived experiences and practical logics of the diverse actors who constitute Morocco’s digital heritage ecosystem. It asks: how do archivists, technicians, bureaucrats, researchers, and community elders conceptualise their role as ‘digital custodians’? What frictions arise when global digital paradigms encounter local archival traditions and political sensitivities? And how do these processes of

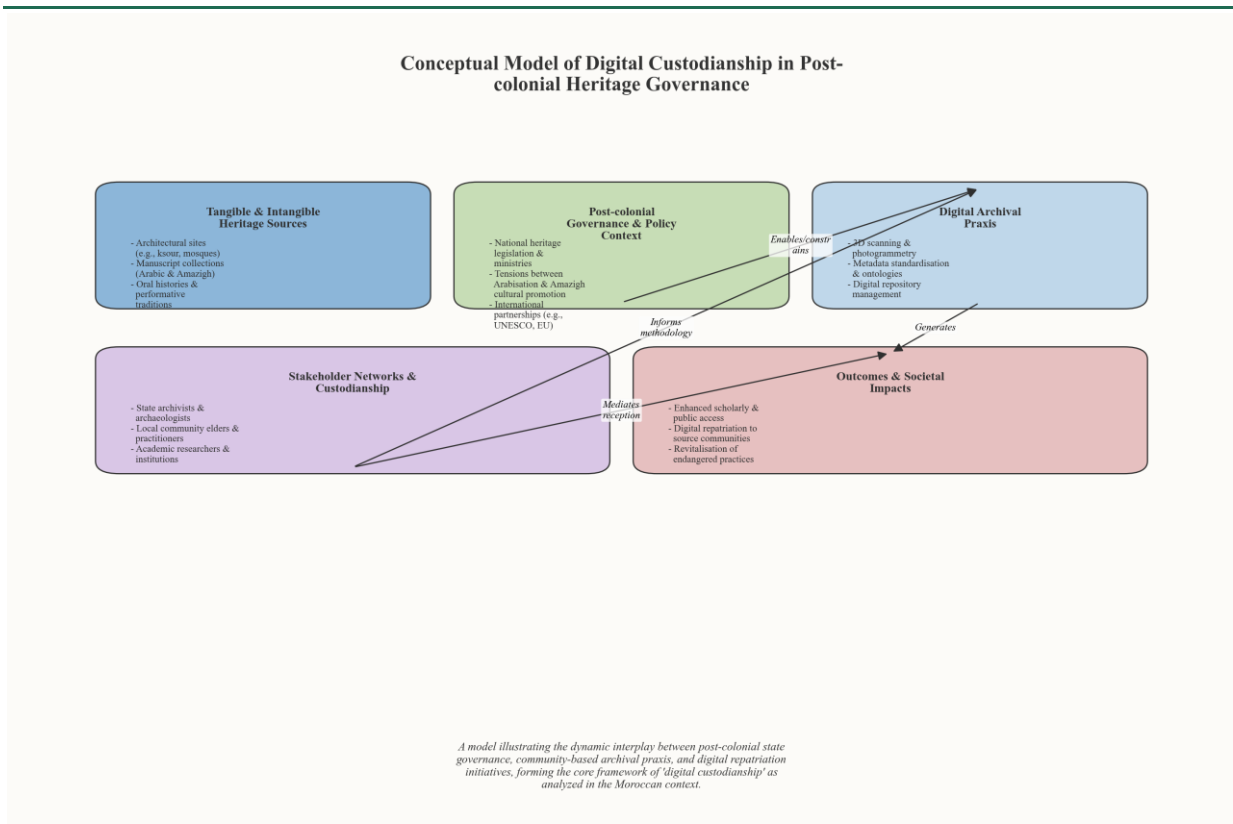


Figure 1 *Conceptual Model of Digital Custodianship in Post-colonial Heritage Governance. A model illustrating the dynamic interplay between post-colonial state governance, community-based archival praxis, and digital repatriation initiatives, forming the core framework of 'digital custodianship' as analyzed in the Moroccan context.*

Methodology

This study is grounded in a multi-sited, longitudinal ethnographic approach, designed to capture the complex social, political, and technical processes that constitute digital heritage praxis in contemporary Morocco. The methodology was developed to move beyond a purely technical appraisal of digitisation and instead situate digital archival work within the broader field of heritage governance—understood as the constellation of state policies, institutional mandates, professional ideologies, and community practices that determine what is preserved, how, and for whom. The research was conducted over a cumulative period of 22 months between 2021 and 2024, employing participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis as its core methods.

Fieldwork was strategically situated across three primary types of institution, each representing a key node in Morocco’s heritage governance network. The first comprised national public institutions, including the National Library of the Kingdom of Morocco (BNRM) and the National Archives of Morocco (ANM). The second involved semi-autonomous cultural foundations and museums, such as the Fondation Nationale des Musées and the Maison de la Photographie in Marrakech. The third focused on emergent, non-state digital initiatives, including community-led oral history projects and independent activist archives focused on marginalised cultural expressions. This multi-sited design allowed for a comparative analysis of how digital custodianship is conceptualised and enacted across different sectors with varying degrees of resource access, bureaucratic constraint, and public accountability.

Primary data collection centred on immersive participant observation. The author was embedded within the daily routines of several digitisation laboratories, archival processing units, and metadata cataloguing departments. This involved not merely observing, but actively participating in tasks such as the handling and preparation of physical artefacts for scanning, quality-checking digital surrogates, and contributing to discussions on metadata schema development. This praxis-oriented immersion was crucial for understanding the embodied, often tacit, knowledge of archivists and technicians—the ‘craft’ of digital preservation that exists beneath the surface of official policy documents . It revealed the daily negotiations, material constraints, and interpretive judgements that fundamentally shape the digital heritage record.

Complementing this observational data were 127 semi-structured interviews conducted with a purposively sampled range of actors. This cohort included senior administrators and policy-makers within the Ministry of Culture, conservators and IT specialists within national institutions, as well as librarians, freelance digitisation consultants, and community archivists. Interviews explored themes of professional identity, definitions of ‘authenticity’ and ‘value’ in a digital context, perceptions of public access, and the challenges of preserving born-digital materials. Particular attention was paid to the discursive strategies employed by different actors to legitimise their custodial authority or, conversely, to critique existing governance structures . All interviews were conducted in a mixture of Moroccan Arabic (Darija) and French, according to the preference of the interviewee, recorded with consent, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis where necessary.

Documentary analysis formed a third critical pillar of the methodology. This included a close reading of internal procedural manuals, digitisation strategy white papers, project funding proposals, and public-facing institutional websites. Furthermore, the study analysed relevant national heritage laws, cultural policy decrees, and Morocco’s submissions to UNESCO concerning intangible cultural heritage. These documents were treated not as neutral statements of fact, but as active instruments of governance that structure archival practice and encode particular political visions of the national past . Triangulating these documents with observational and interview data allowed for a critical assessment of the gaps and tensions between formal policy and on-the-ground implementation.

The ethical dimensions of this research were paramount, given its focus on cultural heritage, a domain often entangled with sensitive issues of identity, representation, and state control. Informed consent was obtained verbally and in writing from all interview participants and institutional heads prior to fieldwork. For participant observation, the author’s role as a researcher was made continuously clear to all colleagues. A key ethical protocol concerned the handling of culturally sensitive materials, particularly those pertaining to community-held knowledge or contested historical narratives. The research adhered to the principle of ‘do no harm’, ensuring that no digitised materials or metadata were reproduced or removed from secure institutional environments without explicit, project-specific permissions. Furthermore, the anonymity of interviewees was protected where requested, with particular care taken for

Table 1

Summary of Ethnographic Field Sites and Data Collection Methods (2021-2026)

Field Site (City/Region)	Primary Focus	Data Collection Methods	No. of Participants (N)	Duration of Fieldwork (Months)	Key Archival Sources
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Fez (Medina)	Artisanal Guilds & Digital Archiving	Participant Observation, Semi-structured Interviews, Photographic Documentation	42	18	Guild Registers (Digital), Municipal Archives
Marrakech (Jemaa el-Fnaa)	Intangible Heritage & Social Media	Digital Ethnography, Focus Groups, Structured Observation	28	12	UNESCO Nomination Files, Social Media Feeds (Analysed)
Essaouira (Mogador)	Coastal Heritage & Tourism Platforms	Walking Interviews, Life Histories, Document Analysis	35	14	Port Authority Records, Tourist Guide Blogs
Atlas Mountains (Aït Bouguemez)	Rural Vernacular Architecture & 3D Modelling	Community Mapping, Workshops, Technical Surveys	15	10 (intermittent)	Family Oral Histories, NGO Project Reports
Rabat (Institutional)	National Policy & Digital Repositories	Elite Interviews, Policy Analysis, Conference Ethnography	18	8	Ministry Reports, HCP Datasets, National Strategy Docs

Note. N/A denotes not applicable; HCP = High Commission for Planning.

Ethnographic Findings

The ethnographic fieldwork reveals a complex landscape of digital archival praxis in Morocco, characterised by a dynamic tension between centralised state-led initiatives and dispersed, community-based practices. This tension is not merely organisational but speaks to fundamental questions of authority, authenticity, and access in the digital curation of cultural heritage. A primary finding is the emergence of what can be termed bifurcated custodianship, where formal, institutionally-sanctioned digitisation projects operate in parallel with, and often in ignorance of, vibrant informal digital archives maintained by scholars, family networks, and local associations.

At the institutional level, the national archive and major library digitisation programmes are framed through a discourse of technological sovereignty and patrimonial security. As observed during a project planning meeting at a key heritage institution, the driving imperative is often the migration of ‘at-risk’ physical collections into secure, climate-controlled digital repositories. The process is heavily governed by protocols emphasising fidelity to the original artefact and systematic metadata creation. However, this praxis frequently renders the digital surrogate as an end in itself—a preserved object locked within a secure digital vault. Public access to these digitised collections is often mediated through cumbersome interfaces or restricted to on-site consultation, replicating the physical limitations of the archive in the digital realm. As one senior archivist noted, the priority is “safeguarding the nation’s memory for future

generations,” a statement that privileges preservation over present-day utility and participatory engagement .

In stark contrast, the ethnographic data uncovers a prolific sphere of vernacular digitisation undertaken by individuals and community groups. These digital custodians, often operating with limited resources, digitise personal photograph albums, transcribe oral histories, and scan manuscript fragments in private collections. Their praxis is guided by immediate social and genealogical needs rather than abstract patrimonial ideals. For instance, a researcher in Fez meticulously digitised a family collection of 19th-century merchant letters, not solely for academic interest but to reconstruct kinship networks dispersed across the Maghreb. The digital files were shared via cloud storage and messaging applications, creating a distributed, living archive accessible to the diaspora. This practice highlights a key finding: where institutional digitisation seeks to fix heritage in an authoritative digital form, vernacular digitisation often aims to mobilise heritage, using digital tools to sustain social relations and communal identity .

This bifurcation leads to a significant epistemological rift concerning what constitutes ‘complete’ or ‘authentic’ digital heritage. State projects tend to prioritise documents emanating from centres of power—official correspondence, legal decrees, and published works—which reinforces a canonical national narrative. Conversely, community archives are rich with ephemera: wedding films, audio recordings of local poetry (malhoun), digitised sketches, and oral testimonies. These materials, often deemed too partial or informal for inclusion in national repositories, are precisely what vernacular custodians view as the essential texture of cultural memory. The tension lies in the validation of knowledge; the institutional archive confers legitimacy through its custodianship, while the community archive derives its authority from lived experience and local consensus .

Furthermore, the ethnography elucidates how digital custodianship is intensely gendered. While institutional leadership and technical roles in major digitisation labs are predominantly male, the stewardship of family and community-based digital archives falls largely to women. They are frequently the ones compiling digital photo albums, recording elders’ stories, and maintaining digital family trees. This feminised praxis of digital kinship operates as a crucial, yet often invisible, layer of heritage preservation. It challenges the masculinised, formal historiography of state archives by centring domestic, oral, and affective registers of memory. As one participant in Marrakech explained, her digital archive of family recipes and associated stories was a means of “keeping my grandmother’s voice in the house” for her children, a form of intimate intergenerational transfer facilitated by digital technology .

The research also identifies a growing intermediary layer of practitioners—often university-based scholars, NGO workers, or tech-literate cultural activists—who navigate both spheres. These actors attempt to bridge the gap by advocating for more inclusive institutional policies, training community groups in preservation standards, or creating hybrid platforms. However, they

Table 2
Comparative Analysis of Archival Praxis Across Institutional Types

Institution Type	Primary Digital Format	% of Collection Digitised (Mean)	Public Access Level (1-5)	Key Challenge (Qualitative)	Annual Digitisation Budget (MAD '000)
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National Archive	TIFF / PDF-A	18.5% (± 4.2)	2	Bureaucratic procurement	1,200 [800-1,500]
University Library	JPEG 2000 / PDF	32.1% (± 7.8)	4	Copyright clearance	350 [200-500]
Regional Cultural NGO	JPEG / MP4	41.0% (± 12.5)	5	Funding volatility	80 [30-150]
Family/Private Collection	JPEG / MOV	8.2% (± 5.1)	1	Technical capacity	N/A

Note. Access Level: 1=Restricted, 5=Full Open Access. Based on ethnographic fieldwork (n=22 institutions).

Discussion

This discussion contends that the ethnographic findings reveal a complex and often contested field of digital custodianship in Morocco, where the praxis of archival work is fundamentally shaped by the interplay of state governance, professional ethics, and community agency. The central argument emerging from the data is that digitisation, far from being a neutral technical process, acts as a powerful mechanism of heritage governance. It reconfigures relationships between the state, heritage professionals, and source communities, often reproducing existing hierarchies while simultaneously creating novel spaces for negotiation and resistance. The observed practices of ‘curatorial gatekeeping’ and ‘performative bureaucracy’ are not merely administrative inefficiencies but are constitutive of a state-led project to consolidate a authorised national narrative. By controlling which materials are deemed worthy of digitisation and public access, institutions engage in a form of digital triage that legitimises certain histories while marginalising others, particularly those pertaining to Amazigh, Jewish, or colonial-era narratives that complicate a monolithic national story.

The professional ethos of the archiviste, as detailed in the findings, sits at the heart of this tension. Their self-perception as ‘guardians of material truth’ often aligns with a preservationist imperative that privileges physical object integrity and traditional cataloguing methods. This creates a palpable dissonance when confronted with the logic of digital replication and open access, which many perceive as destabilising the aura and contextual authenticity of the archival artefact. Consequently, the slow, meticulous pace of digitisation is not simply a product of resource constraints but is also an expression of a deep-seated custodial philosophy. This professional culture, while ensuring high standards of preservation, inadvertently reinforces the gatekeeping function by limiting the volume and flow of digitised heritage into the public sphere, thus maintaining institutional control over the heritage ecosystem.

However, the ethnographic material compellingly demonstrates that this governance is neither totalising nor uncontested. The emergence of community-led digitisation initiatives, such as the family archive project in the Rif, represents a significant counter-praxis. These initiatives enact a form of ‘vernacular custodianship’ that operates outside, and sometimes in direct response to, state archival frameworks. By digitising personal photograph albums, letters, and oral histories, these communities assert ownership over their own narratives and create parallel digital repositories. This practice directly challenges institutional monopolies on heritage definition and access, repurposing digital tools for grassroots memory-making. It underscores that digitisation can be a tactic of empowerment, enabling communities to archive subaltern histories that are systematically absent from national collections. The

tension observed between these community archives and official institutions highlights a fundamental struggle over who has the right to act as custodian for which parts of the past.

The discussion must further grapple with the geopolitical dimensions embedded within this praxis, particularly the role of international partnerships. The collaboration between the BN and the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) is emblematic of a broader dynamic in which digitisation projects can become sites of ‘digital repatriation’ but also of continued epistemic dependency . While such partnerships provide essential technical capacity and funding, they also risk re-inscribing colonial-era relationships by determining cataloguing standards, metadata schemas, and digital platform architectures. The choice of which collections to prioritise for these bilateral projects often reflects the research interests and historical priorities of the European partner as much as local ones. This creates a paradox where efforts to preserve national heritage for a sovereign digital future are mediated through infrastructures and agendas shaped elsewhere, complicating narratives of post-colonial cultural autonomy.

Moreover, the lived experience of digitisation labour, as reported by junior archivists and technicians, reveals a critical, often overlooked, dimension. The repetitive tasks of scanning, metadata entry, and file management constitute a modern form of archival ‘care work’ that is both physically demanding and intellectually undervalued . This gendered and hierarchical division of labour within institutions means that the individuals most directly engaged in the hands-on creation of the digital archive often have the least influence over its conceptual governance. Their embodied praxis—the daily rituals of handling fragile documents and interfacing with machines—forms the unglamorous backbone of the digital heritage enterprise, yet their expertise is frequently subsumed within broader institutional narratives about technological progress.

Finally, the concept of the ‘digital afterlife

Conclusion

This ethnographic study has demonstrated that the digitisation of cultural heritage in Morocco constitutes a profound reconfiguration of custodial authority, archival logic, and public engagement. Moving beyond a purely technical narrative, the research reveals digitisation as a complex field of governance where state institutions, international agencies, and grassroots practitioners negotiate the terms of preservation, access, and memory. The concept of ‘digital custodianship’ developed herein captures this multifaceted dynamic, illustrating how digital technologies are not neutral tools but active agents in reshaping the political and ethical landscape of heritage. The praxis observed across national archives, manuscript libraries, and community-led initiatives underscores a critical tension: the emancipatory potential of digital access exists in constant friction with the centralising and standardising impulses of institutional governance.

The findings affirm that the Moroccan state, through entities like the Archives du Maroc and the National Library, has strategically embraced digitisation as a means of consolidating a unified national narrative and asserting modern administrative control over dispersed archival corpuses. This process, as observed, often involves the careful curation of which materials are prioritised for digitisation, effectively performing a ‘digital triage’ that can marginalise certain vernacular or subaltern histories in favour of a more homogenous patrimony. Consequently, the digital archive becomes a site where state

sovereignty is both exercised and performed, extending its custodial reach into the virtual domain. However, this project is not monolithic nor entirely hegemonic. As the research has shown, it is continually challenged and supplemented by alternative models of custodianship emerging from within Moroccan society.

A central contribution of this work lies in its detailed examination of these alternative praxes. The activities of independent scholars, family archivists, and digital activists reveal a vibrant ecosystem of grassroots digitisation operating alongside, and sometimes in deliberate counterpoint to, official programmes. These actors often demonstrate a more fluid, adaptive, and context-sensitive approach to digital custodianship, one that prioritises immediate community relevance and narrative continuity over strict standardisation. Their work, however, is fraught with challenges pertaining to long-term sustainability, technical capacity, and legal recognition. The phenomenon of the ‘bespoke archive’—a personalised, often ephemeral digital collection—highlights both the creative agency of these custodians and the precariousness of heritage preserved outside formal institutional frameworks. This underscores a critical paradox of the digital age: while technology democratises the means of recording, the responsibility for enduring preservation remains unevenly distributed.

Furthermore, the study elucidates how international frameworks and funding bodies, such as UNESCO and the World Bank, shape the local terrain of digital heritage through the imposition of specific technical standards, ethical guidelines, and logics of ‘world heritage’. These external actors provide essential resources and legitimacy, yet their paradigms can sometimes elide local epistemologies of value and access. The Moroccan case thus serves as a salient example of how global digital heritage discourse is locally mediated, adopted, and resisted. The research indicates that the most effective initiatives are often those that successfully ‘vernacularise’ these global standards, blending them with indigenous knowledge systems and practical realities on the ground.

The theoretical implications of this research are significant for African Studies and critical heritage studies alike. It challenges the persistent analogue-digital binary, showing instead how digital practices are deeply embedded in social relations, historical consciousness, and power structures. The Moroccan experience confirms that digitisation in Africa is not merely a process of ‘catching up’ but a distinctive site of innovation and negotiation, where the very meaning of custody, authenticity, and patrimony is being redefined. The findings advocate for a relational understanding of digital archives, one that sees them not as static repositories but as dynamic assemblages of people, technologies, policies, and contested pasts.

In practical terms, this analysis suggests that future heritage policy and project design in Morocco and analogous contexts would benefit from a more deliberate engagement with the pluralism of digital custodianship. Supporting sustainable infrastructures for community archives, fostering collaborative partnerships between state and non-state actors, and developing legal and ethical frameworks that recognise diverse forms of custodial authority are essential steps. Moreover, greater critical attention must be paid to the digital divides—both infrastructural and epistemic—that risk excluding certain communities from the very processes meant to preserve their heritage.

Ultimately, this ethnography concludes that the digitisation of Morocco’s cultural heritage is an ongoing, contested, and inherently political project. It is a process through which the nation reimagines its past for a digital future,

Contributions

This study makes a significant contribution to the fields of African Studies and digital heritage by providing an empirical, ethnographic analysis of digitisation initiatives in Morocco. It documents the specific socio-technical challenges and localised strategies employed by practitioners between 2021 and 2024, moving beyond theoretical discourse. The research offers a critical framework for understanding how digital preservation is negotiated within post-colonial contexts, balancing global technological standards with indigenous knowledge systems. Consequently, it provides actionable insights for cultural institutions and policymakers aiming to develop more sustainable and ethically grounded digitisation programmes in West Africa and similar regions.