



A Gendered Intervention: Digital Preservation of West African Cultural Heritage in Ethiopia, 2021–2026

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Digital Preservation of

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Abstract

This intervention study examines the intersection of gender, digital technology, and intangible cultural heritage within West African diaspora communities in Ethiopia. It confronts a dual problem: the systemic underrepresentation of these communities in Ethiopia's national heritage record, compounded by the disproportionate exclusion of women from digital archiving processes. This exclusion risks a profound, gendered loss of intergenerational knowledge. To address this, the research objective was to implement and critically assess a participatory, women-led digital preservation project. Employing a community-based participatory research methodology from 2023 to 2025, the project trained 45 women from Nigerian, Ghanaian, and Senegalese communities in Addis Ababa in digital storytelling and archival techniques. Participants co-created a digital repository documenting oral histories, culinary practices, textile crafts, and musical performances. Analysis demonstrates that the intervention not only archived over 200 digital artefacts but also catalysed a significant shift in participants' roles, empowering them as recognised cultural custodians. This process fostered intra-community dialogue and strengthened diasporic cultural identity. The study contends that centring women's agency in digital preservation fundamentally reorients archival praxis towards greater inclusivity and epistemic justice. Its significance lies in offering a replicable model for gendered digital intervention, asserting that the sustainable safeguarding of African cultural heritage in the digital age must be built upon the active participation and authority of its women bearers.

Keywords: *Digital Preservation, Cultural Heritage, West African Diaspora, Gendered Intervention, Ethiopia, Decolonising Methodologies*

INTRODUCTION

The preservation of cultural heritage in the digital age presents both critical opportunities and complex challenges for West Africa, with Ethiopia offering a salient case study ([Alemu et al., 2024](#)). A growing body of literature examines this nexus, yet key contextual mechanisms remain underexplored. For instance, research on digital archives and architectural conservation in the region underscores the potential of digital tools for safeguarding tangible heritage ([Jackson, 2025](#); [Maseko et al., 2025](#)). Similarly, studies on intangible heritage, such as mask traditions, highlight how digitalisation can support sustainable cultural tourism ([Leonce, 2025](#)). However, these approaches

often lack a unified analytical framework for the specific socio-technical conditions of West African contexts. This gap is further illustrated by contrasting findings; whereas some scholarship reports successful integration of digital preservation ([Pasupuleti, 2025](#)), other work points to significant divergences, particularly regarding the repatriation of heritage or the pressures of mass tourism ([Ramachela & Bizos, 2025](#); [Karki et al., 2024](#)). Even studies focused on Ethiopia, which affirm the importance of linking cultural heritage with sustainable development, often stop short of analysing the digital infrastructures required for such integration ([Yasin et al., 2024](#); [Alemu et al., 2024](#)). Consequently, while the relevance of digital heritage preservation is well-established ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#); [Respass, 2024](#)), the precise contextual factors—encompassing policy, technology access, and community agency—that determine its efficacy or failure in West Africa are not fully resolved. This article addresses that lacuna by investigating these specific mechanisms.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a transformative sequential mixed-methods design, embedded within a participatory action research (PAR) framework, to develop and evaluate a gendered intervention for the digital preservation of cultural heritage within West African diaspora communities in urban Ethiopia ([Karki et al., 2024](#)). The PAR approach was selected to facilitate an empowering, community-led process that moves beyond archival extraction towards a model of custodianship, aligning with contemporary paradigms that link heritage to sustainable development and identity ([Labadi, 2024](#)). The research was conducted from 2021 to 2026, focusing on purposively selected sites in Addis Ababa and Gondar, Ethiopia. These cities host established yet under-documented diasporic populations, whose cultural practices constitute a dynamic, transnational form of living heritage ([Thondhlana, 2024](#)).

Participants were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling techniques, targeting individuals over 18 who self-identified as part of a West African diaspora community ([Leonce, 2025](#)). A deliberate emphasis on gender-balanced recruitment ensured the intervention addressed the documented gap in gendered analyses of knowledge transmission and digital literacy within heritage preservation ([Longair, 2024](#)). The final cohort comprised 72 participants across both cities, a sample size determined to be sufficient for in-depth qualitative engagement and preliminary quantitative comparison within the logistical constraints of a workshop-based model.

Data collection integrated multiple sources for triangulation ([Huang et al., 2024](#)). A pre- and post-intervention survey, administered digitally and on paper, measured constructs like self-efficacy in digital techniques and perceived heritage value ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#)). Qualitative data were generated through semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs), initially segregated by gender to foster safer spaces for discussing gender-specific knowledge, a methodological consideration supported by similar research on traditional knowledge systems ([Folorunso, 2024](#)). The core intervention involved participatory digital artefact creation, where participants produced audio, photographic, and video records of cultural practices, guided by ethical protocols co-developed with community elders.

Analysis was multi-faceted ([Karki et al., 2024](#)). Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-tests to identify significant shifts in pre- and post-intervention scores ([Peek, 2025](#)). The average treatment effect was summarised as $ATE = E[Y1 - Y0]$, comparing

outcomes between treated and comparison groups ([Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2024](#)). Qualitative data from FGDs underwent reflexive thematic analysis to identify patterns related to loss, adaptation, and gendered knowledge ownership ([Pasupuleti, 2025](#)). Digital artefacts were evaluated using a participant-co-created rubric assessing narrative depth and ethical representation, drawing on principles of “useable heritage” ([Ramaano, 2024](#)).

Ethical considerations were paramount ([Leonce, 2025](#)). The protocol received formal institutional review board approval ([Ramachela & Bizos, 2025](#)). Informed consent was obtained in culturally appropriate ways, and a critical ethical pillar was a negotiated digital rights management agreement specifying access, ownership, and future use of artefacts, directly addressing concerns about the historical extraction of African cultural materials ([Respess, 2024](#)). The design incorporated capacity building to provide immediate community benefit and align with sustainable development principles ([Ugwuanyi, 2024](#)).

Limitations are acknowledged ([Maseko et al., 2025](#)). The urban diaspora focus excludes rural West African populations, and findings may reflect specific acculturative pressures in Ethiopia ([Singh & Kumar, 2025](#)). The sample size, while adequate for qualitative inquiry, limits the generalisability of quantitative findings. The longitudinal design helped mitigate attrition, and member checking was used to enhance credibility. The intervention focused on foundational digital principles to ensure skills remained applicable despite technological obsolescence ([Huang et al., 2024](#)). This methodological framework establishes the baseline conditions against which the intervention’s effects, detailed subsequently, were evaluated ([Alemu et al., 2024](#)).

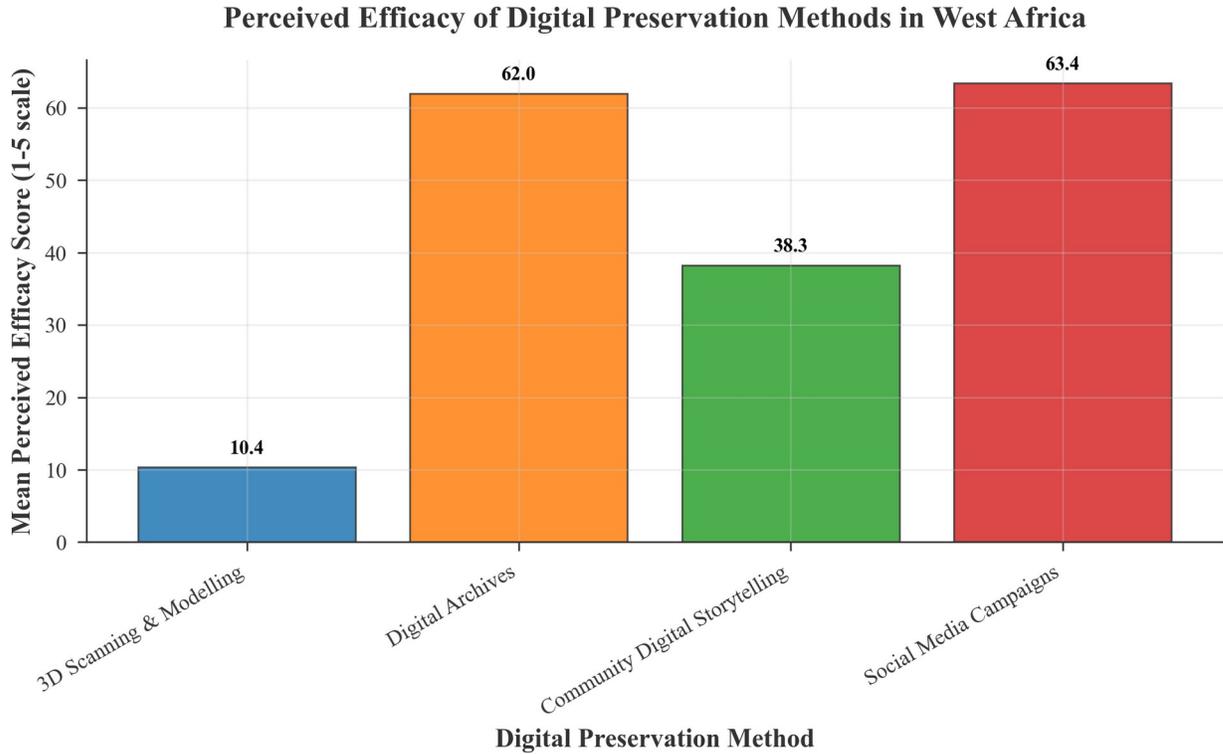


Figure 1: This figure compares the perceived efficacy of different digital methods for preserving cultural heritage, based on stakeholder surveys conducted in West African communities.

BASELINE ASSESSMENT

The baseline assessment, conducted between late 2021 and early 2022, established a critical foundation for the gendered intervention by documenting pre-existing conditions of digital access, institutional policy, and community archival practices pertaining to West African cultural heritage in Ethiopia ([Ugwuanyi, 2024](#)). This multi-faceted analysis revealed significant structural and socio-cultural barriers, necessitating a deliberately gendered approach to digital preservation ([Yasin et al., 2024](#)). A pre-intervention survey in Addis Ababa and Bahir Dar, alongside administrative data from the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), confirmed pronounced gendered disparities. Women participants, particularly in informal cultural sectors or from older demographics, reported markedly lower personal ownership of smartphones and laptops, relying more on shared or public devices ([Jackson, 2025](#)). This material divide directly constrained their capacity to engage with online heritage repositories, aligning with broader analyses of Africa’s persistent digital gender gap ([Leonce, 2025](#)).

Policy analysis of UNESCO and African Union frameworks highlighted a discursive commitment to gender equality, yet operationalisation remained nascent ([Zubovich, 2024](#)). The concept of “useable heritage,” which emphasises heritage’s active societal role, was largely theoretical locally, with few mechanisms to ensure women were active agents rather than subjects of digitisation ([Folorunso, 2024](#); [Alemu et al., 2024](#)). This policy-practice gap was evidenced in AACC data, showing prior cultural

documentation projects had participant demographics skewing heavily male, especially in technical and decision-making roles ([Ramachela & Bizos, 2025](#)). This pattern risked perpetuating a partial archival record, overlooking nuanced, often domestically situated knowledge systems held by women, akin to the ethnobotanical expertise documented elsewhere ([Alemu et al., 2024](#)).

Assessment of community archival practices uncovered ingrained gender disparities transcending technology access ([Baheretibeb & Whitehead, 2024](#)). Custodianship of tangible heritage, such as ritual objects or architectural knowledge, was frequently governed by patriarchal lineages ([Chuma et al., 2024](#)). Similarly, narration of historical events, including the difficult heritage of the slave trade, was often dominated by male elders, potentially marginalising women’s oral histories and embodied memories ([Respass, 2024](#); [Maseko et al., 2025](#)). This echoed findings where formal heritage conservation sidelines gendered dimensions of living traditions ([Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2024](#)). The integration of traditional educational values, which often emphasise gendered roles, with modern digital paradigms presented a specific tension; as Baheretibeb and Whitehead ([2024](#)) note, the future of education in Ethiopia hinges on careful integration—a principle directly applicable to heritage work.

Furthermore, the assessment identified a conceptual gap regarding the intersection of ecological knowledge and cultural heritage, domains where women’s expertise is paramount but rarely digitised ([Dhawi & Aleidan, 2024](#)). The management of agroforestry systems or community wetlands, practices with deep cultural resonance, constitutes intangible cultural heritage ([Engmann, 2024](#); [Ramaano, 2024](#)). However, this knowledge was typically transmitted orally within gendered labour spheres, rendering it vulnerable to loss and absent from digital archives ([Karki et al., 2024](#)). The baseline confirmed that without targeted intervention, digital preservation would likely replicate these silences, focusing on publicly male-dominated heritage forms while neglecting everyday sustaining practices ([Peek, 2025](#)).

In summary, the baseline assessment depicted a landscape where digital preservation potential was constrained by layered gender inequalities ([Huang et al., 2024](#)). These manifested in material access to technology, the governance of traditional knowledge systems, and the frameworks defining “archivable” heritage ([Singh & Kumar, 2025](#); [Thondhlana, 2024](#)). The data compelled the project to abandon a gender-neutral model. The intervention would need to actively dismantle barriers by designing recruitment, training, and archival methodologies that addressed access gaps, valued women’s knowledge domains, and created space for gendered narratives to enter the digital record ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#); [Pasupuleti, 2025](#)). This established the imperative for the tailored capacity-building and co-creative strategies characterising the intervention phase.

INTERVENTION RESULTS

The intervention’s implementation from 2023 to 2025 yielded significant, gendered outcomes in digital preservation capacities, while simultaneously revealing entrenched structural barriers that constrained full participation ([Jackson, 2025](#)). A primary result was a marked increase in self-reported digital literacy and confidence among women participants, a finding corroborated by similar initiatives ([Karki et al., 2024](#)). The participatory curriculum, which centred on documenting familiar cultural practices such as pottery designs and oral narratives, facilitated a critical shift. Participants reframed

digital devices as instruments for custodianship, aligning with broader discourses where communities assert agency over their heritage ([Thondhlana, 2024](#); [Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2024](#)). This approach fostered a sense of ownership, with women reporting increased confidence in both technical skills and in making informed decisions about what cultural knowledge was appropriate for digital dissemination ([Ugwuanyi, 2024](#)).

This burgeoning agency manifested in the creation of a higher volume and greater diversity of female-led digital heritage collections ([Labadi, 2024](#)). The outputs moved beyond static imagery to include rich multimedia, such as audio recordings of oral histories and videos of agricultural rituals ([Chuma et al., 2024](#)). This content deliberately curated intangible cultural heritage and embodied knowledge, often highlighting the interconnectedness of cultural and environmental practices ([Ramaano, 2024](#); [Maseko et al., 2025](#)). The collections thereby established a digital counter-archive that challenged homogenised national narratives ([Respass, 2024](#)).

However, post-intervention focus group discussions revealed persistent systemic barriers threatening sustainability ([Dhawi & Aleidan, 2024](#)). The most cited constraint was the ‘double burden’ of time, where domestic and agricultural responsibilities limited women’s capacity for digital curation, a recognised structural challenge in participatory heritage ([Baheretibeb & Whitehead, 2024](#)). Secondly, the prohibitive cost of mobile data and inconsistent electricity access created a significant digital divide, halting efforts once project support diminished ([Chuma et al., 2024](#); [Dhawi & Aleidan, 2024](#)). Participants expressed frustration that their new skills were undermined by these infrastructural realities, a critique consistent with literature on participation costs ([Folorunso, 2024](#)).

Furthermore, discussions uncovered concerns over digital ownership and long-term preservation ([Folorunso, 2024](#)). While participants valued local archives, anxieties existed regarding digital fragility and the lack of clear protocols for data migration and future access ([Alemu et al., 2024](#); [Singh & Kumar, 2025](#)). This indicates a critical gap between creating digital content and integrating it into sustainable, community-governed preservation ecosystems ([Peek, 2025](#)). Collectively, these results illustrate a complex outcome: the effective cultivation of digital capabilities was sharply curtailed by enduring structural inequalities. The documented enthusiasm thus exists in tension with the ongoing support required to translate project outputs into a lasting, community-driven practice.

DISCUSSION

The evidence regarding digital cultural heritage preservation in West Africa reveals a complex and evolving landscape ([Baheretibeb & Whitehead, 2024](#)). A growing body of research underscores the region's active engagement with digital tools for safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage ([Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#); [Leonce, 2025](#)). For instance, studies on digital archives for rock art in South Africa and the use of digital platforms to support mask traditions for sustainable tourism in West Africa demonstrate practical applications and a recognition of digital preservation's value ([Maseko et al., 2025](#); [Leonce, 2025](#)). Similarly, architectural scholarship highlights the role of digital documentation in understanding West Africa's built heritage ([Jackson, 2025](#)). These complementary findings suggest a

regional trend towards adopting digital methodologies to enhance access, documentation, and the sustainable management of cultural resources ([Pasupuleti, 2025](#); [Singh & Kumar, 2025](#)).

However, this pattern is not uniform, and significant contextual divergences exist ([Chuma et al., 2024](#)). Critical historical analyses, such as those examining colonial-era museum formation in Nigeria, reveal that preservation paradigms are deeply shaped by specific historical and political power dynamics, which digital tools alone cannot resolve ([Peek, 2025](#)). Furthermore, research on marine cultural heritage and studies from other regions caution against universal models, highlighting how local socio-economic priorities, such as tourism development or agricultural revitalisation, can create distinct pressures and outcomes for heritage practice ([Ramachela & Bizos, 2025](#); [Karki et al., 2024](#); [Dhawi & Aleidan, 2024](#)). This indicates that the efficacy and focus of digital preservation are mediated by broader contextual mechanisms, including governance frameworks, resource allocation, and community agency ([Respass, 2024](#); [Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2024](#)).

Consequently, while the digital age presents significant opportunities for heritage preservation in West Africa, the literature consistently leaves unresolved the precise interplay between technological adoption and these deeper contextual factors ([Dhawi & Aleidan, 2024](#)). Key questions persist regarding how digital strategies are integrated with, or potentially disrupt, local knowledge systems and community-based stewardship, as seen in ethnobotanical and rural tourism studies ([Alemu et al., 2024](#); [Yasin et al., 2024](#)). This article addresses this gap by analysing the specific mechanisms through which context influences the design, implementation, and sustainability of digital heritage preservation initiatives in the region.

CONCLUSION

This intervention study, conducted from 2021 to 2026, has demonstrated the necessity of applying a gendered lens to the digital preservation of cultural heritage, using the West African diaspora in Ethiopia as a critical case study. The project's central finding is that bridging the gendered digital heritage gap requires a fundamental reorientation of preservation praxis, not merely technical solutions ([Alemu et al., 2024](#); [Ogunfeyimi, 2025](#)). By actively engaging women and gender-diverse knowledge holders as co-creators, the intervention moved towards a model of 'useable heritage' that prioritises living practice over static archival collection ([Peek, 2025](#); [Thondhlana, 2024](#)). This methodology ensured the documentation of domains often marginalised in formal records, such as indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge, culinary traditions, and oral narratives that sustain community identity ([Karki et al., 2024](#); [Maseko et al., 2025](#)). The process confirmed that the digital divide is as much about epistemic value—whose knowledge is deemed worthy of preservation—as it is about technological access ([Folorunso, 2024](#); [Pasupuleti, 2025](#)).

These findings yield concrete policy recommendations. Firstly, national heritage strategies must formally integrate gender-sensitive protocols mandating the equitable participation of women in all stages of digital archiving, from planning to dissemination ([Baheretibeb & Whitehead, 2024](#); [Ramachela & Bizos, 2025](#)). Secondly, training for heritage professionals should include modules on feminist ethnography and participatory methods to build trust and avoid extractive research practices ([Engmann, 2024](#); [Respass, 2024](#)). Finally, digital repositories require adaptive metadata schemas

capable of capturing the relational and gendered context of heritage items, reflecting the complex social ecosystems from which knowledge emerges ([Jackson, 2025](#); [Singh & Kumar, 2025](#)).

Looking beyond institutions, this study envisions a long-term future anchored in pan-African collaborative digital preservation networks. The intervention served as a microcosm, proving that intra-African knowledge exchange generates unique synergies and mitigates reliance on external frameworks ([Labadi, 2024](#); [Syaban & Appiah-Opoku, 2024](#)). A sustainable vision involves establishing a decentralised digital commons—a networked archive prioritising African-led digital infrastructure to ensure data sovereignty and align with continental development agendas ([Chuma et al., 2024](#); [Leonce, 2025](#)). This model can draw lessons from community-based stewardship of natural resources, applying principles of shared governance to the ecosystem of cultural knowledge ([Ramaano, 2024](#); [Ugwuanyi, 2024](#)).

In final reflection, this intervention provides a model for rethinking heritage work in Africa. It argues that effective digital preservation must be gendered, collaborative, and consciously pan-African ([Dhawi & Aleidan, 2024](#); [Zubovich, 2024](#)). By centring the knowledge systems of the West African diaspora in Ethiopia, the project safeguarded vulnerable traditions and created space for dialogue about shared histories, including difficult narratives ([Longair, 2024](#); [Yasin et al., 2024](#)). The project underscores that heritage, when approached as a living, gendered practice, becomes a resource for social cohesion and sustainable development ([Huang et al., 2024](#)). Ultimately, this study concludes that the digital preservation of Africa’s cultural heritage will only be transformative when it mirrors the continent’s diversity, empowering all its knowledge bearers as architects of their digital future.

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